

RICE UNIVERSITY

**Grotesque Subjects:
Dostoevsky and Modern Southern Fiction, 1930-1960**

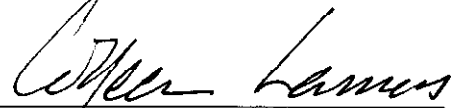
by

Benjamin T. Saxton

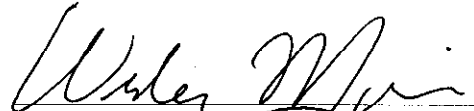
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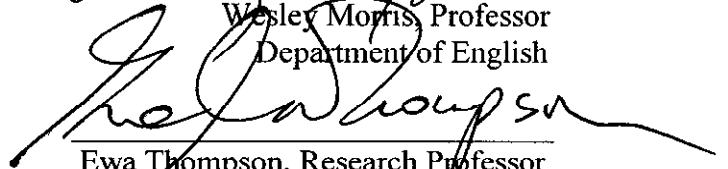
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Abstract

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As a reassessment of the southern grotesque, this dissertation places Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and William Faulkner in context and conversation with the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky. While many southern artists and intellectuals have testified to his importance as a creative model and personal inspiration, Dostoevsky's relationship to southern writers has rarely been the focus of sustained analysis. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's deeply positive understanding of grotesque realism, I see the grotesque as an empowering aesthetic strategy that, for O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, captured their characters' unfinished struggles to achieve renewal despite alienation and pain. My project suggests that the preponderance of a specific type of character in their fiction—a physically or mentally deformed outsider—accounts for both the distinctiveness of the southern grotesque and its affinity with Dostoevsky's artistic approach. His grotesque characters, consequently, can fruitfully illuminate the misfits, mystics, and madmen who stand at the heart—and the margins—of modern southern fiction. By locating one source of the southern grotesque in Dostoevsky's fiction, I assume that the southern literary imagination is not directed incestuously inward toward its southern past but also outward beyond the nation or even the hemisphere. This study thus offers one of the first evaluations of Dostoevsky's impact on southern writers as a group.

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Introduction

This panoply of bodies in process or bodies in pain, this parade of beings on the rim, the painful margins of southern society, appear without ceasing...Why? What causes this obsessive presence in southern literature? What is the source of this impressive display of misfits, dimwits, giant women, and lunatics?

—Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire* (2000)

In her insightful discussion of southern women's writing, Patricia Yaeger gleefully makes the usual expectations strange. Why are there so many deformed and distorted bodies in southern fiction? Where do they come from? Refusing to rely upon the conventional southern fixtures of family, memory, or community, she tackles these questions with new categories that privilege the dirty, the feminine, the wounded, and—most of all—her “not-so-secret-obsession, the southern grotesque” (259).

The southern grotesque also occupies the center of this study. I locate one of its sources, however, in a place where few, including Yaeger, might expect: in the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Despite obstacles of language, culture, and his peculiar religious conservatism, Dostoevsky's fiction has always seemed contemporary if not prophetic, even today; his memorable heroes and anti-heroes have been quoted (and misquoted) by all sorts of writers and public figures, from Albert Einstein to the Beat poets to George W. Bush (Bloshteyn, *Icon* 3). But it has been U.S. southerners, especially, who have pointed to Dostoevsky as a crucial source of inspiration. In his fiction they found, despite different locales, a mirror of lives and bodies in the South: religious mystics and madmen, tormented intellectuals obsessed with God and with the past, diseased fools and

epileptics. As an exploration of the strangeness and vitality of the southern grotesque, this study reads Dostoevsky alongside Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and William Faulkner in an effort to understand those misfits, dimwits, giant women, and lunatics who stand at the heart—and the margins—of southern fiction.

Critical remarks mentioning this literary kinship are not hard to find. In 1941 Carson McCullers boldly claimed that “Modern southern writing seems rather to be most indebted to Russian literature, to be the progeny of the Russian realists” (“Realists” 252). It has also been said that Faulkner is the Dostoevsky of the South; that O'Connor's fiction is populated with “countrified Karamazovs”; that McCullers's lovelorn protagonists are straight out of a Dostoevsky novel; and, most repeatedly, that Dostoevsky's emphasis on alienation, suffering, and deformity finds its analogue in the darker side of southern fiction.¹ The chief problem, however, is this: in spite of these and similar comments that one finds strewn about southern letters, interviews, and essays, Dostoevsky's relationship to southern writers has rarely been the focus of sustained analysis. Maria Bloshteyn, who has recently traced Dostoevsky's reception in American literary culture, has observed that, even as they were quick to acknowledge their debt to him, “there are virtually no scholarly evaluations of Dostoevsky's impact on Southern writers as a group” (“Southern”1).² By placing Dostoevsky in extended contact and

¹ These comments appear in Gray (*Faulkner* 8), Wood (169), and Evans (70), respectively. I explore the implications of these and many other remarks throughout this study.

² Certainly, some scholarship connects Dostoevsky to the southern literary tradition, but often in terms that are too broad or too specific—that is, he is either lumped together with other Russian writers (Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov) or confined to the context of a single southerner's fiction. Bloshteyn's recent comparative work on Dostoevsky is the best resource available for tracing his reception in the South and American culture. Only Bloshteyn, Pachmuss, and Marion Montgomery consider Dostoevsky's impact on southern writers as a group. Myler Wilkinson has examined the intercultural dialogue between American writers and their nineteenth-century Russian counterparts, while Bertram Wyatt-Brown, a prominent southern historian, has analyzed the historical and psychological affinities between nineteenth-century Russian writers, including Dostoevsky, and modern southern writers. Single-author comparisons, which

conversation with O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, I undertake precisely this kind of evaluation.

Bloshteyn's own article offers an insightful (albeit brief) discussion of Dostoevsky's importance to southern writers, focusing on cultural parallels and, like Yaeger, on the grotesque. Although they both acknowledge its positive dimensions—especially as an aesthetic strategy of conflation and subversion—not all critics regard the term with approval. Mab Segrest and others have argued that the grotesque further marginalizes the already marginalized, choosing “the most vulnerable among [us] to punish for [our] own secret alienation, to bear the burden of strangeness” (24). Within the burgeoning field of disability studies, the grotesque has often been dismissed as an imperfect tool, at best, for reading disabled and deformed bodies. For Rosemary Garland Thomson, far too many critics (Flannery O'Connor scholars in particular) view the disabled body merely “as a sign for a degenerate soul or a bankrupt universe” (112). “The term ‘grotesque,’” she adds, “prevents their seeing [O'Connor's] work as perhaps an exploration of physical disability” (168). Real damage can be done, it is suggested, by reading deformed bodies as symbols. Given these objections, it is worth asking at the start: why again the southern grotesque? Why Dostoevsky and the southern grotesque?

First, the grotesque is important because of the sheer preponderance of monstrous and exaggerated bodies in southern fiction. This penchant for extremity is neither subtle nor passive; on the contrary, as broken and contorted figures are continually thrust into the reader's face, the grotesque demands to be seen and heard. “To the hard of hearing

will be discussed in the individual chapters on O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, often lack context. To take one example: while Jean Weisgerber's *Faulkner and Dostoevsky* is filled with exhaustive (and often tendentious) readings linking the two writers, he makes no attempt to situate his discussion within the broader framework of either the southern or American literary tradition.

you shout,” O’Connor famously wrote, “and to the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (*MM* 34). “The grotesque offers a figure of speech with the volume turned up,” adds Yaeger, perhaps with O’Connor’s comment in mind, “a body that entices one’s hearing and speaking because of its anomalousness” (10).

Second, recent scholarship no longer sees the grotesque exclusively as a sign of existential angst or a “bankrupt universe” (Thomson 112). A number of feminist-minded critics, for instance, have argued for the affirmative potential of corporeal contortion and extremity.³ Thomson’s and Segrest’s objections notwithstanding, the grotesque is a powerful, perhaps even an *empowering*, aesthetic strategy that captures a character’s unfinished struggle to achieve renewal despite alienation and pain. In this respect a character’s grotesquerie may become positive or even transgressive; it may also be valuable from an experiential standpoint by conveying a grotesque character’s unique point-of-view on the world. At the same time there is no question that, for O’Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, the aesthetic potential of the grotesque intersected with metaphysical, if not explicitly religious, concerns. The grotesque subjects in southern fiction live the paradox of being at once more “real”—more material, corporeal, in-your-face—and also highly suggestive in their symbolism. It is this combination of seeming both more real *and* more otherworldly, in my opinion, that accounts for the distinctiveness of the southern grotesque and its affinity with a specific type of character found in Dostoevsky’s fiction.

Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire* is also a useful starting point because of the way in which she interrogates standard ways of “doing” southern literary studies. By questioning

³ These critics include Yaeger, Christina Lake, Sarah Gleeson-White, Mary Fusso, Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson, Leonard Casseto, and Rachel Adams (Adams eschews “grotesque” in favor of “freak”). I discuss this group in more detail in chapters one and three, largely in relation to McCullers.

and even exploding traditional categories for thinking about southern literature—"I want to dynamite the rails," she insists (34)—Yaeger participates in what Michael Kreyling and others are now calling "the new southern studies."⁴ By contesting monolithic notions of "the" South as a place characterized by a distinct identity, community, and a tragic sense of life, the new southern studies clears a space for constructions built on different ideas, previously unread authors, and overlooked intersections about southern literature and culture. At bottom, it involves a willingness to put southern literatures in contact and context with other hemispheric or global cultures rather than in relation to the North or to the rest of the United States.

While this project hardly seek to "dynamite the rails" of southern literary studies, it follows the general impulse of the new southern studies to look at southern fiction in a different way. By reading O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner alongside Dostoevsky, I assume that their creative imaginations were not directed incestuously inward toward their southern past but also persistently outward beyond the nation or even the hemisphere.⁵ I am less concerned here with questions of "influence"—whether southern writers approached Dostoevsky with anxious suspicion or out of slavish imitation, for instance—and more concerned with their roles in a "great dialogue," as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, in which "the object is precisely *the passing of a theme through many and various*

⁴As Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer write in the preface to a symposium on southern studies in *American Literature*, "What happens when we unmoor the South from its national harbor, when it becomes a floating signifier in a sea of globalism? How does the South participate in the global networks of culture and economy? How have the South's culture and history always already been global? What are the global gestures in literary texts that we were formerly interpreting as regional or national issues?" (678). Not surprisingly, scholars have tended to examine areas south of the South, especially the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America. For further discussion of the new southern studies, see Smith and Cohn's *Look Away!*; Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* and "Toward a New Southern Studies"; Houston Baker Jr.'s preface to "Violence, the Body and 'the South'"; and Levander and Mignolo's introduction to *The Global South* (2011).

⁵ For a model that departs from a hemispheric approach, see Robert Brinkmeyer's *The Fourth Ghost* (2009), which discusses ways in which southern literary imagination was shaped by European fascism.

voices” (*Problems* 265). Like the remarkably dialogic space of Dostoevsky’s fiction in which the word is always double-voiced and intersubjective, so too are there conversations among and between texts: a talking back and forth from the national to the transnational, from one literary tradition to another.⁶ I try to tease out overlapping themes and techniques—the intertextual ripples and echoes of conversation—that appear when one pairs Dostoevsky with southern fiction. Part of my reasoning for the internal structure of each chapter, which oscillates between moments in Dostoevsky and moments in O’Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, is to reproduce this sense of a broader dialogue at work.

As my emphasis on dialogue might suggest, much of this project is informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin; it has been both challenging and illuminating to discover the links between different areas of his thought. While Bakhtin’s deeply positive understanding of the grotesque is a centerpiece of this project, I draw upon some of his other ideas as well: his notion of intertextuality, the “incarnational motifs” that underpin his work on the grotesque body (in chapter two), and his theories of dialogue and monologue (in chapter four). As a final bonus, Bakhtin’s pathbreaking *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929) explores many of these ideas in the specific context of Dostoevsky’s fiction.

The next chapter expands upon some of the comparative dimensions just mentioned and discusses the various uses and possibilities of the grotesque. I consider the ways in which similar institutions (serfdom and slavery), positions in the world economy (peripheral or colonial status) and stages of cultural transition (social upheaval) generated remarkably similar literatures in nineteenth-century Russia and the U.S. South. These

⁶ See Gray’s *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature* (2007).

cultural affinities offer a starting point from which to understand both Dostoevsky's attractiveness to southern artists and their shared interest in the grotesque. I suggest that the southern grotesque is distinguished by characters that suffer from either physical or mental deformity. Rather than subjecting the grotesque to mockery or treating him as an inscrutable "other," southern writers tend to present him from a compassionate perspective. Next, I explain how Dostoevsky's use of the grotesque is intimately tied to his special or "fantastic" realism that exposes the extraordinary phenomena of everyday life, resulting in a familiar world that grows strange. His artistic approach is also anchored, like the southern grotesque, in a specific type of character whose deformities often result from pathology, bankrupt ideals, or the alienating conditions of modernity. On the one hand, then, the grotesque stood as a useful figure of thought for presenting a set of problems plaguing the South and nineteenth-century Russia; on the other, it stood as a bridge that could link the metaphysical with the mundane or, as Carson McCullers put it, "the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail" ("Realists" 252).

In the subsequent chapters on O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, my general focus remains the same—the grotesque as a type of character—but I recognize that the southern grotesque is inconstant, metaphormic, and unpredictable: its forms change, even within the same author's texts. As a result, I try to approach each writer on his or her own terms. Chapter two considers the ways in which O'Connor's fiction, like Dostoevsky's, is grounded in an "incarnational" vision of art in which the grotesque body, in its resemblance to the broken body of Christ, has redemptive potential. As a result of this deeply positive understanding of the grotesque, the prospect of renewal is often present even—and sometimes especially—in the ugliest, most deformed human bodies.

Characters like O.E. Parker and Sonia Marmeladov suggest that what seems ugly or worthless may, in fact, be redemptive. The chapter pairs *Crime and Punishment*, a novel that is particularly concerned with questions of suffering and renewal, with “Revelation” and “Parker’s Back,” two stories containing instances of O’Connor’s “positive” grotesque at work.

Like the grotesque itself, which is characterized by opposition, the critical history of the southern grotesque has been similarly divided into two camps: the traditional, metaphysically-minded camp of Leslie Fiedler and Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (one might call it the “old school”); and the current feminist, corporeally-minded camp of Patricia Yaeger and Sarah Gleeson-White, among others (“the new school”). This shift in critical emphasis indicates the way in which the grotesque carries with it a delicate interplay between the immaterial and the corporeal. In practice, however, both dimensions of the grotesque have been cordoned off, as if one side were somehow opposed to the other. Such overcompensation, I suggest in chapter three, scants the tragic dimensions of McCullers’s fiction on the one hand and her subversive treatment of gender and sexuality on the other.

Turning to *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* and *The Idiot*, I argue that McCullers found in Dostoevsky’s novel—especially in the Myshkin-Rogozhin-Nastasya love triangle—a model for her own treatment of love, spiritual isolation, and silent desire. My reading of John Singer and Prince Myshkin attempts to preserve the tension between queer and religious readings of the two characters; both readings, like competing understandings of the grotesque, remain in tension and are inseparable. Singer and Myshkin are compelling, in other words, because they invite questions about faith and

religion that are *linked to* tremendous confusion about their bodies and their sexuality. McCullers's suggestive use of paradox, silence and non-verbal forms of communication is fruitfully illuminated when read alongside Dostoevsky and his Orthodox background.

Despite the provocative use of grotesque bodies within their fiction, O'Connor's and McCullers's fiction is governed by a detached, "objective" narrator (one per story) whose tone is remarkably composed. This is not to suggest that they were poor stylists—just the opposite!—but merely that they were not narrative experimentalists. Faulkner's and Dostoevsky's mode of presentation, on the other hand, is maximalist and innovative; their fiction is filled with a panoply of narrators who, far from being "reliable," often suffer from extreme emotional agitation or even madness. In chapter four, I make explicit the ways in which a character's grotesquerie manifests itself not only in his or her physical actions (on the level of the plot), but also, as a function of that character's dual role as a narrator, within the fabric of the narrative as well.

Unlike Bakhtin, whose understanding of dialogue was irrepressibly positive, I argue that Faulkner and Dostoevsky were keenly aware of the negative, even destructive, potential of dialogue and infused this sense of contentiousness throughout their fiction. Their characters, refusing to cede the narrative reins, engage in power struggles that are often coercive rather than benevolent. Like Ivan Karamazov, Darl Bundren, Quentin Compson, and Rosa Coldfield strenuously resist other voices in order to impose control over the story. Through various strategies of isolation or exclusion—refusing to talk, failing to listen, objectifying others—they try to shut others out or shut them up. A character's grotesquerie, I suggest, is one consequence of this coercion and isolation. In this respect the grotesque is less physical than mental. As Faulkner's and Dostoevsky's

distressed narrators occupy that liminal space wherein the grotesque resides, they—and we, as readers—experience a world in which what is real and unreal, or sane and mad, becomes difficult or impossible to distinguish. By examining the dark underbelly or the “negative” side of Bakhtinian dialogue, the chapter also measures the distance between the carnival grotesque and the modern grotesque. I assume, from start to finish, that “the” southern grotesque, like “the” South, is always a construction, a wish; many variations lurk and play within the strange spaces of southern fiction.

Chapter One

Dostoevsky and the South: Critical Connections

The road from Dostoevsky to the American South begins in England. Since the publication of his mature novels in the 1860s, there has been no shortage of interest in Dostoevsky's work in either Russia or the West. For many English intellectuals, this interest grew obsessive during the "Russian Craze" of the 1920s when a widespread fascination with Russian literature dovetailed with the emergence of high modernism. Virginia Woolf was so taken with the Russians that she declared that "the most elementary remarks upon modern fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence, and if the Russians are mentioned one runs the risk of feeling that to write of any fiction save theirs is a waste of time" (*Essays* 109). The so-called "Dostoevsky Cult," as D.S. Mirsky famously put it, stood at the center of the craze. Elsewhere Wolfe praised the originality and psychological depth of Dostoevsky's fiction, which challenged Victorian literary conventions without abandoning entirely the methods of literary realism.

Alone among writers Dostoevsky has the power of reconstructing those most swift and complicated states of mind, of rethinking the whole train of thought in all its speed, now as it flashes into light, now as it lapses into darkness....This is the exact opposite of the method adopted, perforce, by most of our novelists. They reproduce all the external appearances—tricks of manner, landscape, dress, and the effect of the hero upon his friends—but very rarely, and only for an instant, penetrate to the tumult of thought which rages within his own mind. But the whole fabric of a book by Dostoevsky is made out of such material....We have to get rid of the old tune which runs so persistently in our ears and to realize how little of our humanity is expressed in that old tune. (*Portraits* 118-19)

As Wolfe suggests—pointing, no doubt, to her own literary style of interiority—Dostoevsky was one of the first writers to capture the dense inner lives of his characters, the sweetness and tumult of their minds.

The admiration of English literati was complicated by the fact that the influence of Russian literature was coextensive with the work of translators, since virtually none of the English writers reading their work knew any Russian. Their reliance was upon one translator in particular, Constance Garnett, whose name has become synonymous with the translation of Russian literature. The prodigious output of her work is at least as impressive as its quality: D.H. Lawrence marveled at the way in which Garnett, sitting outside in her garden, translated the work of Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov at a break-neck speed (May 37). Beginning with *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1912, Garnett translated eleven volumes of Dostoevsky's work in the next eight years, which English intellectuals consumed greedily.¹ Shortly thereafter, when the Modern Library used her work overseas, Garnett's translations introduced Dostoevsky to American readers, which would eventually include O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner.²

Even as the fascination with Dostoevsky began to wane in England during the 1920s, Dostoevsky continued to be important to Americans as a writer, thinker, and personal

¹ From 1912 to 1920 Garnett translated *The Idiot* and *Notes from the Underground* (1913); *The Possessed* and *Crime and Punishment* (1914); *The House of the Dead* and *The Insulted and the Injured* (1915); *A Raw Youth* (1916); and, from 1917 to 1920, collections of his short stories (Heilbrun 208). Garnett's detractors, including Vladimir Nabokov and others, have accused her of numerous errors: that she smoothes over irregularities in style, writes in a Victorian idiom already outmoded in her day, fails to convey dialects, occasionally mistranslates or skips over difficult phrases, "tames" bawdy or improper conversations, and generally provides a simplified, standardized version of the text. Despite these criticisms, most scholars agree that Garnett succeeded in the challenge of translating Dostoevsky's notoriously difficult texts, and, even today, her work remains the standard against which new translations are measured. Further discussion appears in May, especially 30-42, Bloshteyn, and Heilbrun.

² All three read Dostoevsky in the Garnett translation (Kinney; Blotner; Carr). Throughout this study I use Garnett's translations of Dostoevsky's novels; because so many editions exist, I include the section, chapter, and page number from which the quote is taken.

inspiration. According to Bloshteyn, “an extraordinary number of Americans throughout the twentieth-century testified to the importance of Dostoevsky to their lives and work” (*Icon* 42). She offers Henry Miller, the Beat poets, and Richard Wright as examples of American writers who, in spite of their radical politics, embraced Dostoevsky as one of their most important models. Yet it has been southern writers, she adds, who have most consistently testified to the importance of his work. Not only the southerners considered here but also Shelby Foote, Walker Percy, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, and Tennessee Williams heralded Dostoevsky as their favorite Russian writer, even above Tolstoy (Bloshteyn, “South” 1). Before turning to O’Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner and the southern grotesque, I begin by considering the confluences and parallels between nineteenth-century Russia and the U.S. South and, secondly, why Dostoevsky was especially appealing to southern writers.

In “Russian Realists and Southern Literature,” a valuable essay comparing Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev with her southern contemporaries, Carson McCullers suggests that the affinity between the two “schools” of writers is not accidental. “The circumstances under which Southern literature has been produced,” she writes, “are strikingly like those under which the Russians functioned. In both old Russia and the South up to the present time a dominant characteristic was the cheapness of human life” (“Realists” 252). Beyond the rural lifestyle and rampant poverty of both regions, McCullers’s comments point most directly to the repressive institutions of serfdom and slavery.³ The persistence of unfree labor contributed, quite understandably, to the

³ A few historians, most notably Peter Kolchin, have explored this connection. Kolchin writes that, in spite of different environments, “Russian serfdom had by the second half of the eighteenth century become essentially a variant of slavery, much closer to American chattel slavery than to the serfdom of, say, medieval France” (x).

assumption that both areas were sites of industrial and cultural backwardness—places that fostered an indifference to cruelty and even, as McCullers put it, a belief in the “cheapness” of humans as commodities.

While responses to the inevitable demise of serfdom and slavery were mixed—emancipation was grudgingly accepted by the Russian gentry and fiercely resisted by southern slaveholders—the collapse of both systems of bondage, which came only four years apart, ushered in similar eras of social turmoil and modernization. Emancipation also came on the heels of devastating and embarrassing military defeats that led to a sense of lingering shame, loss, and inadequacy. Although the Crimean War (1853-56) was more distant and less bloody than the American Civil War, it exposed Russia as inept in both technology and military prowess; it also, as Orlando Figes has recently noted, left Russia with a deep sense of resentment of the West, a feeling of betrayal that the other Christian states had sided with the Ottoman Empire (xxi). A deeply self-conscious Russian intelligentsia, split between the so-called Slavophiles and Westernizers, debated whether to conform to Western culture. The former group, utterly opposed to the idea, argued that Europe had been corrupted by rationalism, legalism, materialism, and individualism and thus called for a return to the Orthodox conception of *sobernost* (community) that would eventually unite the peasants with the aristocratic minority. The latter group, which included the diverse opinions of Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky, and Mikhail Bakunin, stressed that European culture was necessary to tear the masses of uneducated peasants from ancestral backwardness.

The ambivalence in Russian society toward European culture mirrored debates concerning whether the South should integrate or alienate itself from the modernity and

industry of the North. “The Russian intelligentsia,” writes Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “looked with envy at the vigorous cultural life of the West European states just as the Southern intellectual felt humbled by the achievements of Northern and transatlantic artists and philosophers” (“Russian” 203). For the authors of that famous polemic *I’ll Take My Stand*, the South faced the daunting task of defending against modernity in the interest of preserving familiar southern customs and traditions. Indeed, the Agrarians rushed to point out the distinctiveness of the South within the nation.⁴ The mythologizing of the Old South among writers as diverse as Thomas Nelson Page, the Agrarians, and Faulkner bears a striking resemblance to the “retrospective utopianism” of the Slavophiles, whose image of pre-Petrine Russia was largely imagined and idealized (Walicki 114). The southern poet-critic Marion Montgomery has noted the similarities between the Slavophiles and Agrarians: “One will recognize as well why Dostoevsky feels a sympathy for the scattered party called the ‘Slavophiles,’ who in relation to their regional concerns have for us (as we encounter them through Dostoevsky) affinities with those Southern Agrarians. For the Nashville Fugitive-Agrarians are in many respects our ‘Slavophiles’” (“Southern” 60).

Montgomery’s invocation of Dostoevsky in this context is interesting. On the one hand, he is surely justified in linking him with the Slavophiles. Politically passionate throughout his life, Dostoevsky was a founding member of the *pochvennichestvo* movement, which sought to bridge the divide between the Westerners and the

⁴The impulse to regard the South as somehow “other” from the rest of the country is, of course, not new: C. Vann Woodward famously observed in the 1950s that the South’s foundational myths derived from a history of defeat, shame, and poverty stood fundamentally opposed to the American myths of progress and opportunity. See especially Woodward’s chapter “The Irony of Southern History.” As Jennifer Rae Greeson has more recently shown, the South has long been used by the rest of the nation as a foil against which to define itself: “what remains constant across U.S. history is the conceptual structure provided to us by the South: it is an internal other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole” (1).

Slavophiles in post-reform Russia.⁵ As he grew older (and more conservative) Dostoevsky moved further into the orbit of the Slavophiles. While accepting the need to adopt the best of Western civilization, he called for a return to Russian values, which he increasingly saw as crucial to the salvation of not only Russia but the world. Like the Slavophiles, he preached that Europe had long ago sold its soul to the principles of abstraction and materialism. Russia, by contrast, with its ideals of universality and reconciliation, had retained its sense of organic community (*sobornost*).

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to conclude, as Montgomery's statement might suggest, that southern writers (including the Agrarians) were primarily drawn to Dostoevsky because of his politics. This is doubly true of O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, who were either liberal in their views (McCullers) or virtually apolitical in their public statements (O'Connor and Faulkner). Southern writers were rather attracted to Dostoevsky's fiction and its treatment of chaos, turmoil, and cultural upheaval, which contrasted sharply with the harmonious, even idyllic, depictions of his contemporaries:

While Turgenev, Goncharov, and Lev Tolstoy painted grand epics of the impregnable order of the Russian 'cosmos,' Dostoevsky cried out that this cosmos was unstable, that beneath it chaos was already beginning to stir. In the midst of general prosperity, he alone spoke of the cultural crisis and of the unimagined catastrophes that awaited the world. (Mochulsky xvii)

For modern southerners, these depictions not only evoked the transformation of the devastated Confederacy during Reconstruction, but also the then-current crisis of a

⁵The term (also called native soil conservatism) derives its meaning from *pochva*, or "soil," which also suggests an accessory meaning of "foundation" or "support." This state of being rooted in the soil contrasted with *bespochvennost*, meaning the state of being uprooted from the soil (a term that was applied derisively to the Westernizers) (Frank, *Seeds of Revolt*). Dostoevsky's political statements can be found in the (literally) thousands of pages of his editorials, much of which is available in Kenneth Lantz's English translation.

Depression-era South being forced to choose between its agrarian roots and an increasingly modernizing “New South.” They, like Dostoevsky, were consumed with the “the past in the present,” as Allen Tate famously put it; or, in Michael Kreyling’s more irreverent paraphrase, from “the whiplash caused by the collision of a traditional culture with a modern one” (“New Provincialism” 292; *Inventing* 5).

Dostoevsky’s Russian-centric focus was also, paradoxically, an inspiration for southern writers. Whereas Turgenev repudiated Russian culture in favor of European society and lived for many years as an expatriate, Dostoevsky thought that writers should live and seek inspiration in their homeland rather than abroad, a sentiment that Flannery O’Connor echoed in “The Regional Writer” when she observed that southern artists “apparently feel the need of expatriation less than other writers in this country” (Frank, *Miraculous* 223; *MM* 53).⁶ Just as Dostoevsky declined to follow European conventions and wrote essentially about the Russian people, so too did southern writers feel the need to overcome a sense of provincialism and embrace their identity. Indeed, it was only when Faulkner blended modernist forms with his “postage stamp of native soil,” Yoknapatawpha county, that his masterpieces emerged. Dostoevsky thus stood as an example to whom southern writers could look for confidence in their regional traditions, helping them turn a perceived weakness—their status as “outsiders”—into an advantage.

For Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Dostoevsky’s legacy in the South is not just noteworthy; it is outright staggering. In terms of “the borrowing of Russian literary tropes and their translation into fiction chiefly Southern in character,” Wyatt-Brown notes that “[b]y far the most significant writer in this respect—once again—was Dostoevsky. He

⁶Throughout this study I abbreviate O’Connor’s collected letters, essays, and collected stories as “HB” (*The Habit of Being*), “MM” (*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*), and CS (*The Collected Stories*).

loomed so large that Southern writers experienced what Harold Bloom identified many years ago as the anxiety of influence” (“Russian” 211). Dostoevsky’s influence was indeed as towering as it was daunting. It is perhaps unsurprising that Shelby Foote, Walker Percy, and W.J. Cash all wrote, or tried to write, novels that were consciously modeled after Dostoevsky. Once a promising novelist, Foote switched to nonfiction because his ambitious attempt to write a novel in the mold of *The Brothers Karamazov* failed (Wyatt-Brown, “Russian” 221).⁷ There is recurring image from Ken Burns’s epic documentary *The Civil War* that I cannot resist mentioning in this context (my discovery was completely unexpected and, well, a bit strange). Throughout the film Burns relies on the marvelous commentary of Foote, that great historian of the war whose soft, southern drawl and mild-mannered temperament made him a celebrity after the documentary aired in 1990. As Burns repeatedly cuts to Foote sitting in his home library, if one looks behind Foote’s right shoulder a book sits on the shelf with a faded but unmistakable title: “Dostoevsky.” Wyatt-Brown was right. “Dostoevsky” loomed—literally and metaphorically—behind Foote and his southern contemporaries.

⁷ Foote deeply admired Dostoevsky. He wrote to Walker Percy that Dostoevsky’s fiction “was so great that whoever wants to can concentrate on a single facet and be struck with the terrific power of the whole, like the point of a spear with the weight of the shaft behind it” (2). Even after finishing his masterpiece *The Mind of the South*, Cash fancied himself a writer of fiction and dabbled in a novel “in the manner of Dostoevsky” (qtd. in O’Brien 188). Percy said in an interview that the ending of *The Moviegoer*—when Binx Bolling talks with a group of children—was written as a salute to the final pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* (66).

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Most broadly, then, the kinship between Dostoevsky and modern southerners involved a dense cultural intertextuality and translatability. Southerners were drawn to the Russian classics, and particularly to Dostoevsky, largely because the South, as McCullers puts it, “has always been a section apart from the rest of the United States, having interests and a personality distinctly its own” (“Realists” 254). The most enduring associations with the South—slavery, poverty, backwardness, tragedy—separate it from national ideals of progress and prosperity and align it with the turmoil captured in the Russian literary tradition and, above all, in Dostoevsky’s chaos-filled fiction. In comparing these two ostensibly alien cultures, I do not mean to ignore the differences between them. Surely the most obvious is the meteoric rise of the Soviet regime on the one hand and the perennially marginal status of the South on the other. While the Soviets would go on to terrorize Eastern Europe and indeed the world, southerners would continue to live with the painful reminders of “defeated grandfathers and freed slaves...and bullets in the dining room table,” as Shreve says to Quentin (*Absalom* 361). Moreover, to argue for an exclusive affinity between nineteenth-century Russia and the South would be shortsighted and misleading; the cultural and economic similarities just mentioned could apply to many other formerly colonial, underdeveloped peripheries

around the globe, many other “Souths.”⁸ Nevertheless, even a cursory overview between the two cultures reveals some illuminating confluences and, perhaps, could be explored further, although that is not the primary aim of this study.⁹

In what follows, I argue for a still deeper connection between Dostoevsky and modern southern fiction. In my opinion, the principle link between them—and here I confine my discussion to O’Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner—has to do with a specific technique that thrives on paradox, incongruity, and strangeness (here is McCullers again):

In the South during the past fifteen years a genre of writing has come about that is sufficiently homogeneous to have led critics to label it “the Gothic School.” This tag, however, is unfortunate. The effect of a Gothic tale may be similar to that of a Faulkner story in its evocation of horror, beauty, and emotional ambivalence—but this effect evolves from opposite sources; in the former the means used are romantic or supernatural, in the latter a peculiar and intense realism.

(“Realists” 252)

In this passage McCullers acknowledges a debt and identifies a misconception. The debt is that of the southern modernists to the Russian realists; the misconception is the tendency among critics to label these southern writers a “Gothic school” without recognizing the fundamental difference between the supernaturalism of Gothic tales and the “peculiar and intense” realism of modern southern fiction. Rarely containing ghosts, monsters, witches, or other supernatural phenomena that are common within the Gothic tradition,¹⁰ its peculiar effect comes from “a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of

⁸“South-to-South relations” has recently been proposed as a governing term that excludes privileged regions (“the global north”) and encourages the comparative study between underdeveloped parts of the world: “the term refers to a network that intentionally leaves out the global north. In this geo-political configuration, the global south is taking the place of the Third World and the implied global north the place of the First World” (Levander and Mignolo 8).

⁹ See, for instance, Dale Peterson’s comparative study of Russian and African-American soul, which is one of the few cross-cultural studies of its kind.

¹⁰While there is certainly a degree of overlap between the grotesque and the gothic, in this study I use “grotesque” to distinguish the literature from the sense of the supernatural that “gothic” evokes.

the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail” (“Realists” 252).

As an example of this method, McCullers cites Marmeladov’s funeral supper in *Crime and Punishment*. After their initial meeting in the tavern (see chapter two), Raskolnikov happens to be in the street when horses trod Marmeladov to death; Semyon’s wife, Katerina, hosts a funeral supper to mourn her husband’s passing. Although his death should presumably infuse the room with a mood of somber reflection, the supper devolves into an outrageous scene of ribaldry. The guests drink heavily and make a mockery of the evening, with Katerina getting into shouting matches with the landlady. An atmosphere of death and mourning is paired with extended descriptions of the food served and the appearance of a clerk “who had not a word to say for himself and smelt abominably” (qtd in McCullers, “Realists” 252). This fusion of contradictory emotions of farce and tragedy “acts on the reader with an almost physical force” (“Realists” 253).

McCullers points out that a similar effect is achieved in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that, from start to finish, fuses the comic with the tragic. The purpose of the Bundrens’ journey, to bury Addie in her hometown, contrasts with the family’s hidden, material desires—false teeth, an abortion, bananas, a gramophone. As they plod toward town, the disasters multiply. They lose their mules while fording a stream. Cash breaks his leg, which becomes gangrenous. Dewey Dell is blackmailed by a store clerk. Darl goes mad. All the while Addie’s body decomposes in the heat until it begins to stink. “Farce and tragedy,” McCullers concludes, “have always been used as foils for each other. But it is rare, except in the works of the Russians and the Southerners, that they are

superimposed one upon the other so that their effects are experienced simultaneously” (“Realists” 253). For McCullers, then, the chief similarity between Russian realism and modern southern writing is not its supernaturalism, which would locate it within the Gothic tradition, but its tendency to conflate or juxtapose the comic and the tragic, the high and the low, or the concrete and the abstract. McCullers’s description points, of course, toward the grotesque.

II. Toward the Southern Grotesque

Though the phenomenon it describes is far older than its name, the term “grotesque” is fairly new, deriving from the grottos (*grottesche*) in which paintings were unearthed during the excavations of Nero’s ruined palace in fifteenth-century Italy. There was an immediate interest in this odd and extravagant style of decorative art that conflated human features with beasts, birds, and plants. The term initially described the peculiar visual art of certain Renaissance painters, most notably Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. Eventually its purview extended to a wide assortment of early modern literature, including Rabelais, Shakespeare, Dante, Montaigne and, by the nineteenth century, Francisco Goya, E.T.A. Hoffman, Nikolai Gogol, and Edgar Allen Poe. The twentieth century and beyond has witnessed a tremendous and wide-ranging assortment of the grotesque style in art, literature, film, and virtually any other imaginable genre.



Erhard Schön, *Der Teufel mit her Sackpfeife* (c. 1530)



Giuseppe Archimboldo, *Wasser* (c. 1566)

While the grotesque has proven to be a remarkably chameleon-like concept—it is easy to spot but tough to define—it is almost always understood as a combination of, or a tension between, humor and horror, beauty and ugliness, or comedy and tragedy. As early as 1853, John Ruskin wrote in *The Stones of Venice* that the grotesque “is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful...[but]...there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements: there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all idea of jest” (45). The degree to which humor commingles with horror may vary considerably, but the grotesque always contains some combination of opposites, however much one side may predominate over the other. Its effect, consequently, is that “the mind, under certain phases of excitement, *plays with terror*” (Ruskin 45).

There have been a number of modern efforts to define the grotesque, the most notable being the now-classic studies of Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser. Like Ruskin, they see the grotesque as a type of play, although they disagree strongly over the relation between its ludicrous and fearsome sides. Their opposed theories also address different periods of Western culture: for Bakhtin, the Middle Ages and Renaissance; for Kayser, romanticism and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1957), Kayser defines the grotesque as “a play with the absurd...an attempt to subdue the demonic aspect of the world” (6). This is not a world of fantasy or faerie that one finds in, say, Tolkien’s fiction, because such worlds do not *become* strange; as other worlds, they simply *are* strange. On the contrary, Kayser has in mind a familiar world that suddenly appears hostile. “The grotesque world,” he writes, “is our

world—and is not. Horror mixed with smiles has its basis in the experience that our familiar world, seemingly moored in a fixed order, turns topsy-turvy, its order nullified”

(6). Humanity struggles to orient itself within a normal world that has grown terrible. The laughter of the grotesque, as a result, is bitter, mocking, and ironic—perhaps even demonic.

A central element of Kayser’s grotesque, then, is mental alienation, even madness. As a dreamlike or nightmarish vision piercing the façade of reason and comfort, the grotesque intertwines spheres of reality often kept apart. Bernard McElroy, following Kayser, writes that “The grotesque transforms the world from what we ‘know’ it to be to what we fear it might be. It distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it. The grotesque does not address the rationalist in us or the scientist in us, but the vestigial primitive in us, the child in us, the potential psychotic in us” (5). This, surely, is the grotesque of Kafka, Poe, and Freud’s uncanny, in which hallucinations and coincidences are deeply unsettling. Along somewhat different lines, Geoffrey Harpham’s *On The Grotesque* (1982) centers upon structural contradiction instead of ambivalent emotional response. For Harpham, the grotesque resides in the “interval” between things that logically should be separated while still being joined together, a definition that depends less upon physical incongruity than on mental and conceptual distortion.¹¹

In contrast to Kayser, Bakhtin offers a strikingly affirmative concept of the grotesque that focuses upon the ever-shifting contours of the human body. While

¹¹ Harpham writes that grotesqueries “defy logical, physical, and ontological categories that are used to make sense out of things: they stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable parts” (3).

Bakhtin's account of the grotesque appears principally in *Rabelais in his World* (1968), it is also intimately (if implicitly) connected to his broader theory of dialogics. For Bakhtin, an individual is never a single, isolated person in full possession of his or her speech, but rather a person among persons who is speaking within a specific context. As Michael Holquist explains, "Bakhtin's point is that I *can* mean what I say, but only indirectly, at a second remove, in words that I take and give back to the community according to the protocols it observes. My voice can mean, but only with others—at times in chorus, but at the best of times in dialogue" (12). This vision of the world is in tension, however, with a highly individualized (capitalist) society that divides the self from itself, the other, and the larger community, all of which stifles dialogue. In response, Bakhtin turns to medieval folk culture, especially the Rabelesian carnival, in order to recover a world that privileges equality over hierarchy; dialogue over monologue; participation over representation; the social self rather than the individualistic self; and the full body in communion with the natural world rather than the body abstracted and privatized. Bakhtin's carnival thus stands as a sort of Edenic alternative to the rigidity and individualism of modern society.

It is at the point of realizing this ideal world, of bringing it into being, that the grotesque becomes important for Bakhtin because it provides a concrete, embodied instance of unfinished dialogue and community. "The grotesque body," Bakhtin writes, "is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (*Rabelais* 26). Existing in a state of flux and renewal, body and world as well as body and body are involved with one another in constant exchange. Rigid oppositions are dismantled and overturned. All sorts

of mockery, degradation, and inversion (nose/phallus, face/buttocks, inside/outside, sacred/profane, high culture/low culture) defy any easy recognition of what is private or public, good or bad, repulsive or attractive. All parts are parts of the whole. Although Bakhtin concedes that the grotesque can be fearful, he argues that this terror points not to the demonic, as Kayser asserts, but rather to a renewed world that will be liberated by laughter: “The medieval and Renaissance grotesque, filled with the spirit of carnival, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fear and is therefore completely gay and bright. All that is frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (*Rabelais* 47). Kayser’s horror-oriented view of the grotesque is far too gloomy for Bakhtin, who stresses its positive qualities and its hope of renewal, even within death: “the grave is related to the earth’s life-giving womb” (*Rabelais* 50). The underlying concept of Bakhtin’s theory, then, is “life as a whole,” a totality of life that links bodies with one another and the world in one grotesque carnival.



—Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fat Kitchen* (c. 1563)



—Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Festival of Fools* (c. 1570)

Any overview of the grotesque is sure to prompt a number of questions. If the grotesque has become so prolific that it suggests “estrangement” or “radical alienness,” then how can it be identified? Harpham’s thought-provoking treatment of the grotesque as an “interval” or “paradox,” for instance, could conceivably apply to all art, all literature, and most communication. In some quarters the term is synonymous with modernist literary strategies of contradiction and absurdity; one critic has equated the grotesque with American modernism while another has declared that it is the essence of American literature.¹² What then can be said about the relationship between the grotesque in general and the southern grotesque in particular? In other words, what is “southern” about the southern grotesque?

Both Kayser’s and Bakhtin’s notions of the grotesque have been applied to modern southern fiction, which has long been considered a breeding ground for the strange and bizarre. Initially critical readers tended to submit, with Kayser, that the southern grotesque allegorizes a type of existential anguish and disaffection with modern life—a disaffection that, as discussed above, would be especially pronounced in the traditional South.¹³ Many of these early critics were spurred on by comments of the fiction writers themselves. In an often-quoted remark, for instance, McCullers writes that “Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes...Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about—people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their

¹² See Millichap’s “The Grotesque as Modernist Genre” and William Van O’Connor’s *The Grotesque: An American Genre*, 3-20.

¹³ William O’Connor, Millichap, and Fiedler link the grotesque with terror and violence. Fiedler describes American literature as “a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (29).

spiritual incapacity to love or receive love—their spiritual isolation” (“Flowering Dream” 274). In this respect the southern grotesque, with its portraits of freakish outsiders who struggle to find love or a permanent home, stands as a potent example of the symbolic, “negative” grotesque in which physical deformities and mental aberrations symbolize existential alienation.

More recently, however, critics have re-appropriated the southern grotesque in Bakhtinian terms. For Yaeger, deformed and wounded bodies (especially female bodies) become corporeal spaces for mapping a region’s social and psychic fears and desires. While the grotesque is not exclusively southern, to be sure, she argues that “its bizarrely opened bodies are particularly useful in bearing witness to the soul-puncturing rigidity of a culture where gender arrangements have been lacerating and racial cruelty is taken for granted” (232). Reading grotesque bodies in terms of oppression, whether racial or sexual, can thus contribute to social or political change. Sarah Gleeson-White, along similar lines, argues that Bakhtin’s emphasis on corporeality offers a way to appreciate the positive and affirmative nature of the strange bodies that wander through southern fiction: “This is the invigorating aspect of the Bakhtinian grotesque: it is transgressive because it challenges normative forms of representation and behavior; it disturbs because it loves the abject and will not rest; it is always in a state of becoming” (“Revisiting” 110). Her study, which focuses on the grotesque in McCullers’s fiction, aims to redirect the southern grotesque from an index of metaphysical angst to the potential of the human body for growth, transformation, and resistance. Both critics’ approaches are thus deeply indebted to, but consciously revisionary of, Bakhtin’s: the open, unfinished grotesque

body contests the *status quo* in a process that, for Yaeger, is often painful and, for Gleeson-White, is potentially painful *and* joyful.

In general, then, critical assessments of the southern grotesque have shifted from Kayser's grotesque, which stresses terror and metaphysical alienation, to Bakhtin's grotesque, which stresses playfulness, corporeality, and transgression. Although Bakhtin's and Kayser's concepts of the grotesques diverge sharply, I do not think that they are mutually exclusive. Instead, they represent two poles of the grotesque: the corporeal and the affirmative (Bakhtin) and the mental-psychological and the fearful (Kayser). In a way their disagreement is fitting since, as Dieter Meindl has pointed out, "the central characteristic, or effect [of the grotesque], is self-contradiction, given the fact that it incorporates such opposites as laughter and anxiety" (18). A point that I will be making throughout this study, especially in chapter three, is that the material and the metaphysical dimensions of the southern grotesque are essential and inseparable. Rather than choose between Bakhtin's and Kayser's versions of the grotesque, I try to see the connections between both versions in order to develop a larger view of the possibilities of the grotesque. Such an approach will hopefully shed light on both "poles"—although, to be sure, the southern grotesque is often oriented toward the dark pole.

This brings me to a second question: how does Dostoevsky's use of the grotesque align with, or complicate, the grotesque as it appears in O'Connor's, McCullers's, and Faulkner's fiction? To begin answering this question, I start with Alan Spiegel's insightful article on the southern grotesque. Since I use his theory as a point of departure for my own understanding of the term, here is the relevant passage in full:

The grotesque...always appears in Southern fiction as either a physically or mentally deformed figure. If he appears as one of the physically deformed, he

may be a cripple, a dwarf, a deaf mute, a blind man, or an androgynous adolescent (i.e., the deformed as the *unformed*). If he appears as one of the mentally deformed, he may be either an idiot or a mad-man, a half-wit or a psychotic—a sub-normal or an abnormal figure. But whether he appears as a physical cripple or a mental cripple, he succeeds as a literary creation because his deformity never exceeds his humanity; that is, if we find him meaningful, his deformity will not separate him from us, but rather will bring him closer to us. (428-9)

This collection of deformed outsiders invites the classification of the southern grotesque not as a particular type of story, mood, or mode of expression but rather as a specific *type of character*. Throughout this study I focus on characters who, on the one hand, are grotesque through physical debility or deformity (Ruby Turpin and Raskolnikov, O.E. Parker and Sonia Marmeladov, John Singer and Prince Myshkin); and those who are grotesque, on the other hand, through mental deformity (Ivan Karamazov, Darl Bundren, Rosa Coldfield, and Quentin Compson). In both cases, as Spiegel notes, the grotesque character's deformity does not repel him from us but "bring[s] him closer to us" (429).

Spiegel's discussion is also useful because he argues that the "type of character" of the southern grotesque can be traced back "most notably...[to] Dostoevsky's 'underground man'" (3). Like most critics, Spiegel passes over his remark on Dostoevsky without considering *why* his fiction yields a "type of character" that is so similar to the grotesques in southern fiction. I try to answer this question in the next section.

III. Dostoevsky's Fantastic Realism and the Grotesque

They call me a psychologist: it's not true, I am a realist in a higher sense, that is, I depict all the depths of the human soul. (Frank, *Prophet* 739)¹⁴

Dostoevsky's interpreters rarely discuss his fiction in terms of the grotesque. They prefer "fantastic realism," a shorthand term that reflects Dostoevsky's own efforts to describe his artistic approach.¹⁵ Critics generally agree that fantastic realism exposes the extraordinary phenomena existing within (or beneath, or behind) the placid surface of everyday life, resulting in a familiar world that appears strange. They disagree, however, on the source(s) of this strangeness. Some critics have argued that the "fantastic" side of Dostoevsky's fantastic realism points to a higher spiritual or poetic space;¹⁶ some have argued via Bakhtin that it results from the failure of competing voices to achieve polyphony (Jones); others locate it in the strangeness that results from the alienating effects of the modern city;¹⁷ still others, most notably Joseph Frank, call attention to the way in which Dostoevsky's fantastic realism can be derived from the ideological content of his fiction; and some have read his fiction in the light of Dostoevsky's pathologies,

¹⁴ Translations of Dostoevsky's extra-literary statements are taken from Joseph Frank's stupendous, five-volume biography *Dostoevsky*, which is the definitive biography of Dostoevsky in English; Dostoevsky's *Letters*, edited by Frank and translated by Andrew McAndrew; and *A Writer's Diary*, translated by Kenneth Latz. For Dostoevsky's complete writings and correspondences in the original Russian, see *F.M. Dostoevskii: Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [Collected Works of Dostoevsky in Thirty Volumes].

¹⁵ See Jones's *Dostoevsky after Bakhtin* (especially 1-31) and "The Evolution of Fantastic Realism in Russian Literature." Although it is unclear whether Dostoevsky used precisely this expression, Jones writes that "his statements about his style fully justify its use as a shorthand term" ("Evolution" 1).

¹⁶ See Jackson.

¹⁷ See Fanger and Berman.

especially his epilepsy.¹⁸ In what follows, I examine two of Dostoevsky's letters in order to map out a few general principles of his fantastic realism; then I try to make explicit the way in which his grotesque characters follow naturally from his artistic approach.

Dostoevsky often struggled to conform his fiction to "real life." To an extent his attention to literary verisimilitude, to the representation of the probable rather than the merely possible, followed the prescriptions of nineteenth-century realism. His first novel *Poor Folk* (1846), for instance, was hailed as a model for social realism. But Dostoevsky's eccentric angle of vision, which often focused upon the real and the improbable, led to a great deal of critical controversy. In 1846 Vissarion Belinsky, the famous social critic of Saint Petersburg, dismissed Dostoevsky's *The Double* for its fantasticality. The paranoia and hallucinations in Dostoevsky's second novel, he wrote, "can have a place only in madhouses, but not in literature, being the business of doctors, not poets" (Frank, *The Seeds of Revolt* 177).

Belinsky's critique was especially damaging to Dostoevsky because, only a few months earlier, he had effusively praised *Poor Folk*. It was not until the fall of 1868, when Dostoevsky was hard at work on *The Idiot*, that he would defend his special type of realism. His friend and colleague Apollon Maikov read an early manuscript of the novel and, while pleased with it in general, found certain aspects of the book unbelievable. The characters in the novel, Maikov explained, "live in a fantastic world, on all of them there is, though powerful, still some sort of fantastic, exceptional lighting. One can't stop reading, and at the same time—you don't believe it" (Frank, *Miraculous* 301). He reiterated this criticism six months later, writing that "the chief criticism is in the fantasticality of the characters" (Frank, *Miraculous*, 308). Far from being an insignificant

¹⁸ See Rice's *The Healing Art*.

quibble, Maikov's views went to the heart of Dostoevsky's artistic approach and presented a serious objection. If Dostoevsky's fiction evoked incredulous responses from his readers—and even his close friends—how could it be appreciated? Moreover, what sort of transformative impact could such implausible stories have on Russian society? Dostoevsky's reply marked his first explicit defense of the fantastic as it appeared in his fiction:

I have a totally different conception of reality and realism than our novelists and critics. My idealism—is more real than their realism. God! Just to narrate sensibly what we Russians have lived through in the last ten years of our spiritual development—yes, would not the realists shout that this is fantasy! And yet this is genuine, existing realism. This is realism, only deeper; while they swim in shallow waters... Their realism—cannot illuminate a hundredth part of the facts that are real and actually occurring. And with our idealism, we have predicted facts. It's happened. (Frank, *Miraculous*, 308)

Six months later, he wrote another letter to Maikov that built upon the first:

I have my own particular view of reality (in art), and what the majority calls almost fantastic and exceptional, for me sometimes constitutes the very essence of the real. The ordinariness of events and routine view of them is not realism in my view, and even the opposite. In every issue of a newspaper you run across an account of actual, most surprising facts. For our writers, they are fantastic; they pay no attention to them, and yet they are reality because they are *facts*. Who notices them, explains them, and sets them down? They occur all the time and every minute, and are by no means exceptional... We just let reality pass by our nose. Who will note the facts and delve into them? ... Is not my fantastic *Idiot* reality, yes, and the most ordinary! Just right now such characters must exist in the strata of our society detached from the soil—strata which have in truth become fantastic! (Frank, *Miraculous* 351; italics in original)

In both letters Dostoevsky mentions, but does not name, the “novelists and critics” whose conceptions of realism, he believes, fall short of his own. Specifically he is referring to a group of radical critics, led by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who stressed the social utility of art over its aesthetic value (see chapter two). Where Chernyshevsky and his followers went wrong in their artistic approach, Dostoevsky believed, was in their slavish fidelity to

material, everyday reality. In stark contrast, Dostoevsky posits an external reality visible to all *and* an underlying or interior reality that, while hidden to the casual observer or the shortsighted critic, is apprehended by the competent artist (words like “deeper,” “shallow,” and “illuminate” underscore this notion). In this formulation the artist does not merely see but *sees through* to the deeper (and for Dostoevsky the moral and Christian) reality that was rooted in the image of the Russian people. Dostoevsky discovered the need to penetrate the veneer of outward appearances when he was imprisoned in Siberia with Russian peasants who, on the surface, were vulgar, disgusting, and, as the narrator of *Notes from the Dead House* observes, covered by a “repulsive crust” (184). However, “one need only remove the outer husk and scrutinize the grain within attentively, closely and without prejudice, to see things in the people of which he had never even dreamed” (*Dead House* 184).

To some degree, then, Dostoevsky’s special realism involves a type of heightened vision that aligns him with the modernism of Wolfe, Conrad,¹⁹ and (as we will see) O’Connor. But a different facet of Dostoevsky’s realism brings him still closer to southern writers in particular: “fantastic” in the sense of abnormal, marginal, extreme. Even as Dostoevsky craved the classical forms of beauty that he saw in the German Romantics (especially Schiller) and the Gospels, he was unable to ignore the exigencies of life in mid-nineteenth-century Russia in which orthodoxy gave way to radicalism; when social and political structures were upturned; and when the common individual was thrown headlong into the chaotic, indifferent space of the modern city. Given these new conditions in which the Russian individual was “detached from the soil,” as Dostoevsky

¹⁹In spite of his distaste for Dostoevsky, Conrad expresses his artistic project in a remarkably similar way: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see” (*Preface*).

puts it to Maikov, how could the artist accurately represent Russian reality? His answer—art that accounted for the increasingly fantastic nature of contemporary Russian life—engendered the subject matter for which Dostoevsky is most famous: outrageous crimes, murders, scandals, and the depiction of marginal, downtrodden, lower-class, and grotesque figures of Saint Petersburg.²⁰

These so-called “fantastic” creations were not fictions, Dostoevsky insisted, but rather actualities that could be verified in Russian society. “It is said,” he wrote in 1868, “that recently, i.e., several months ago, in one of our most renowned monasteries a stupid and cruel monk had beaten to death in the school a ten-year-old boy—and this, in the presence of witnesses. Now, at first glance, isn’t this a fantastic happening? And yet, it seems, it is quite true” (*Diary* 45). This is only one of many instances in which Dostoevsky draws upon incredible events in contemporary Russian society that, while considered fantastic by the majority, are nonetheless “facts.” Despite this incident’s status as a fact, Dostoevsky continues, “were someone to describe it, people would at once start shouting that it is incredible, exceptional; that it has been depicted with a preconceived aim” (*Diary* 45). Are not these extreme instances, Dostoevsky asks, just as important and revealing as the thousands of trivial, mundane accountings of life? Yet the prevailing view of realism omits them, dismissing these events as illusion and unreality when Dostoevsky sees them as “the very essence of the real.”

²⁰Donald Fanger puts the matter very well when he writes that the central concern of Dostoevsky’s fiction is “with what happened to the traditional staples of human nature when placed in an unnatural setting and subjected to pressure, many of them new in kind and all of them new in degree. The results—strangeness, alienation, crime, *as a matter of fact*—explain much of the common technical inventory: a carefully fostered sense of mystery (atmosphere), of grotesquerie, a penchant for stark contrasts, for the improbably, the sensational, the dramatic” (viii).

Dostoevsky concludes his first letter with the triumphant declaration that “with our idealism, we have predicted facts. It’s happened.” In other words, not only did Dostoevsky capture the simultaneously incredible and actual events in Russian society, but it also, he believed, *anticipated* events with an uncanny frequency. Perhaps most famously, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* unsettled readers with its graphic murder of the pawnbroker. About halfway through the conception of the novel, in January 1866, the very crime that Dostoevsky envisioned occurred when a student killed a moneylender (albeit without Raskolnikov’s weapon of choice, an axe) (Frank, *Miraculous* 45).²¹ These contemporary events confirmed Dostoevsky’s suspicions that he was not being gratuitous in his deployment of fantastic realism, but that his fiction portrayed a society that was growing increasingly volatile and destructive. Robert Jackson puts it best: “Raskolnikov’s crime has social reality (or typicality) for Dostoevsky not because students in the 1860s killed helpless pawnbrokers with axes, but because the syndrome of Raskolnikov’s moral, psychological, and ideological being reveals in its roots deep imbalances within Russian society” (85). As the values, custom, and beliefs of the old ways clashed with the new, Russian society and its inhabitants were slowly growing grotesque.

Dostoevsky thus acknowledged that the content of his fiction—violence, crime, erratic behavior, psychological or sexual transgressions—admittedly *appears* fantastic to the untrained or casual observer. Upon closer inspection, however (or with an eye toward

²¹To provide another example, Dostoevsky’s novel *The Devils* (1872) was largely based on Sergei Nechaev (1847-1882), a revolutionary who murdered a student in the interest of his political cause. Upon completing the novel and rendering a fictional account of how the revolutionaries might have acted, Dostoevsky was pleased to learn that his descriptions were once again verified in society: “In *The Devils* there were a number of characters who were criticized for being fantastic; since then, believe me, they have all been justified by reality. I had figured them out correctly” (qtd in Linner, “Realism” 68).

contemporary Russian newspapers) one finds that what seems incredible is actually justified by real-life events. Indeed, sometimes these happenings are even more incredible than those the artist imagines. For confirmation we need to look no further than Dostoevsky's own life. How many of us can imagine finding ourselves, after a period of solitary confinement in a fortress, facing certain death by firing squad only to be granted a last-minute reprieve? Or a letter informing us that our father has just been brutally murdered by his serfs? Take into account, too, Dostoevsky's life-long battle with epilepsy (which also caused the death of son), his years as a prisoner in a Siberian labor camp, his episodes of compulsive gambling, and his tumultuous affairs and unrequited loves. "The stuff of Dostoevsky's life," writes Robin Miller, "was often far stranger, more violent, more fantastic, than the stuff of fiction" (*Worlds* 6).

It is easy to see parallels in the often "fantastic" quality of southern fiction. The uncanny coincidences of O'Connor's stories, the stripped-down, parabolic landscapes of McCullers's towns, the outrageous behavior of Faulkner's characters—we continually encounter moments in which strangeness is a permanent property of the gritty everyday. Many early critics struggled to account for, or to even describe, this strangeness. Consider this defense (or is it an indictment?) from one of Faulkner's early reviewers:

To people who do not know the South, or Mississippi, Faulkner's characters seem fantastic, impossible creations, off-shoots of a morbidic imagination, but the fact of the matter is his characters are so absolutely and completely real, so forthrightly actual, that the very dregs of the country live in them, seep through them, distort and disfigure them. (Calverton 175).

In this rendering the South, like Dostoevsky's Russia, "seep[s] through" Faulkner's characters and turns them into grotesques (in a clearly pejorative sense). It is this mixture of the miraculous and the mundane that McCullers seizes upon (in a much more positive

sense) during her discussion of the “peculiar and intense realism” that exaggerates rather than resolves the abnormalities found in “normal,” day-to-day experience.

McCullers is perhaps alone in her preference for categorizing southern fiction as “realism,” however peculiar. Indeed, labeling southern fiction as “grotesque,” “Gothic,” or “realistic” is fraught with inconsistencies, as O’Connor once wryly noted: “anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (*MM* 40). How is one to navigate between these different terms that, by their very nature, are slippery and imprecise? I doubt that any solution exists. The important point, I think, is that “fantastic realism” and the grotesque share a *tension* between heterogeneous elements: each term describes the conflation (to recall McCullers’s comment once more) of tragedy with comedy, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the profane, and the fantastic with the real. However unfashionable the “actual” has become in postmodern culture, the writers in this study—and many others, from Cormac McCarthy to David Foster Wallace to Philip Roth²²—were obsessed with conforming their fiction to “reality” (however fantastic) even as they experimented with fictive distortions and grotesquerie.

²²As Roth puts it, “the American writer in the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (176)

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Dostoevsky's fantastic realism was not merely a collection of aesthetic statements; it was rooted in a recurring "type of character" that bears a striking affinity with the grotesques in southern fiction, as Spiegel noted. Bernard McElroy has also argued that the peculiar anti-hero of *Notes from the Underground* "dramatizes with particular force and clarity the attitudes and obsessions that were to become the mainstream of fiction of the grotesque in [the twentieth] century" (22). As a middle-aged, former civil servant talking to himself on paper, the underground man's raving autobiography stands as a brilliant examination of the relationship between self and other in the modern city—an environment that, Dostoevsky tells us, is bound to produce underground men in large numbers.²³ As the Underground Man rants and raves about his place in a world that gives unlimited credit to abstractions and utopian fantasies,²⁴ his grotesquerie manifests itself not through physical deformity but, instead, through the fears and aberrations of interior psychic life. In this respect the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* is hardly an exception in Dostoevsky's fiction. Like Raskolnikov, who rationalizes his way into the horrific murders of an elderly pawnbroker and her sister, the Underground Man's grotesquerie indicates (or embodies) his disturbed state of mind and the bankruptcy of the principles by which he has lived his life. This is similar, though not

²³ In an introductory footnote, he writes, "The author of the diary and the diary itself are fictitious, of course. Nevertheless, people like the author of these notes not only may, but actually must exist in our society, considering the general circumstances under which our society was formed" (*Underground* 3).

²⁴ As Joseph Frank has noticed, both *Notes from the Underground* and *Crime and Punishment* contest the central tenet of Chernyshevsky's so-called "rational egoism," which held that individual reason (with the help of reason and science) would lead to a perfect society (*Miraculous* 218). Further discussion appears in chapter two.

identical, to Sherwood Anderson's grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio*, who single out one truth by which to live their lives and thereby reduce their truth into a falsehood:

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood. (24)

It also prefigures the grotesques in McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* who see John Singer not for what he is—a deaf, lonely man who cares nothing for them—but as the savior that they wish him to be.

The Underground Man is also an outcast: he is one of Patricia Yaeger's "throwaways" (76), an alienated member of society who demands to be seen and heard. Like the grotesque figures in the South, the Underground Man wears his alienation on his sleeve. While many of his protagonists are shunned by society and tormented by self-loathing, Dostoevsky consistently presents their struggles in a sympathetic light. Faulkner acknowledged that Dostoevsky's "capacity for compassion" was one of the traits that he tried to emulate in his own writing. (*Lion in the Garden* 69). Rather than relating the story of the grotesques from without and merely talking *about* the grotesque, both southern writers and Dostoevsky often relate the story from within and treat the grotesque with commiseration. Once we step inside the shoes of Ivan or Darl, Raskolnikov or Quentin, we begin to experience his peculiar angle of vision and extend a degree of empathy that otherwise would not exist if we see the grotesque from the outside.²⁵

Hermann Hesse's remark about Dostoevsky's characters applies as well to southern

²⁵This is Spiegel's point in linking the southern grotesque to a type of character characterized by deformity: "the Southern novelist, by choosing to relate his story from the point of view of the grotesque, bestows upon him the pity and compassion that is withheld from him by the society at large" (428).

grotesques: “The strange thing is that we look at the faces of these criminals, hysterics, and idiots of Dostoevsky quite differently than we do at the faces of other criminals or fools in other famous novels, that we understand and love them so uncannily that we must feel in ourselves something related and akin to these people” (110).

The elusive “something” that draws us to these grotesque characters is often the experience of pain, rejection, and suffering—an insight with which the authors considered in this study were especially able to relate. It is surely worth noting that McCullers, O’Connor, Dostoevsky, and Bakhtin all suffered personally from severe physical disability. O’Connor lost her battle with lupus at thirty-nine.²⁶ Bedridden during the final years of her life, McCullers suffered from chronic illness and depression (Carr). As noted earlier, Dostoevsky suffered from epilepsy and, it is likely, some form of chronic or clinical depression.²⁷ Bakhtin lived with severe osteomyelitis from the age of nine, resulting in fevers, chronic infection, and the amputation of his right leg.²⁸ Although Faulkner was spared physical debility, his psychological anguish as an alcoholic was arguably no less painful.²⁹

All these personal instances indicate the way in which an illness may generate or reinforce a vision of the world predicated on the special significance of suffering. The ineffable experience of pain often translates into a powerful desire to shape suffering into

²⁶“I have never been anywhere but sick,” O’Connor confessed towards the end of her life. “In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s always a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow” (*HB* 163).

²⁷ See Rice’s *The Healing Art*.

²⁸ Clark and Holquist write that “Bakhtin was subject to periodic inflammation of the hip joint, which flared up several times a year, giving him acute pain and high temperatures and obliging him to spend as much as a month or two in bed...the pain was so great that he conducted his classes while lying on a couch” (51). Bakhtin’s insistence on the positive qualities of the grotesque body is surely tied to the travails of a man struggling to accept his physical deformities in a society in which millions of human bodies were being destroyed as worthless in the name of totalitarianism.

²⁹See Wyatt-Brown’s “William Faulkner: Art, Alienation, and Alcohol.”

story. As I will be suggesting throughout this study, the representation of grotesquerie in southern fiction is often wrapped up in a redemptive, if not an explicitly religious, process in which debasement, suffering, and alienation may offer a path to renewal. The multiplicity of southern grotesques—characters whose bodies or minds are diseased, deformed, or degenerating—live the paradox that it is our wounds that heal us and our sicknesses that teach us about health.

This unflinching emphasis on the ailing body brings us to perhaps the most striking connection between Dostoevsky and southern writers: the way in which the grotesque functioned as a bridge between a mundane, everyday event and its larger, metaphysical significance. A few of Flannery O'Connor's comments, perhaps the best-known practitioner of the southern grotesque, are relevant here. Because it is a culture steeped in religion (though not necessarily authentic belief), O'Connor believed that the South is still capable of recognizing the grotesque: "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak you have to have conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (*MM* 44). O'Connor goes on to discuss how southern novelists use the grotesque to connect two disparate things: "one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in" (*MM* 42-3). The grotesque becomes useful, then, because it connects "high," metaphysical questions with "low," physical concerns, or what McCullers calls "the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail" ("Realists" 252). Often this conflation involves tragedy and the mystery of death, on the one hand, with the comedy of gross physicality. It is telling that the single direct quote

from McCullers's essay is a description of the clerk who, after witnessing Marmeladov's death, "had not a word to say for himself and smelt abominably" (qtd. in "Realists" 253).

The funeral supper in *Crime and Punishment* is only one of many instances in which Dostoevsky uses bodily decay to point to the spiritual dimension of death and the fate of the soul. Another example is the elder Zosima's death in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the scene, Zosima's disciples are hoping that their master will give a sign of his saintliness. They expect, in short, that his body will be spared the indignity of physical decomposition. To their dismay, the process of bodily decomposition intensifies, and Dostoevsky lays heavy stress on the material surroundings: the age and the frailty of the deceased, the heat, the pressing of the crowd, the closed windows, the locked doors. Following O'Connor's definition, the "point in the concrete" is the rapid decay of Zosima's flesh, while the "point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in" is the eventual bestowment of a new body and the reunion of the monks with their beloved elder. The emphasis on the smelly clerk and Zosima's decomposing body calls attention to the cyclical process of death that, ultimately, will end in renewal. In these and similar moments throughout his fiction—Zosima's death and decay, Ivan Karamazov's meeting with his devil, Myshkin and Rogozhin's vigil over Nastasya's dead body—Dostoevsky often preserves the tension between mundane explanations of these events and what Malcolm Jones has called "non-naturalistic explanations."³⁰ For Bloshteyn, Dostoevsky's concern with religious or "ultimate" questions is the "key" that attracted

³⁰ "The whole tenor of Dostoevsky's world," he writes, "is to question the ultimate ability of naturalistic explanations to account for what is most compelling about human experience and conduct, its refusal to settle comfortably into patterns of bourgeois common sense and its insistence on the belief that the visions and insight which elude these patterns contain a higher truth, which the 'Euclidian mind,' as Ivan Karamazov calls it, is incapable of grasping" ("Evolution" 63).

southern writers to his work (“Southern” 15). As a writer whose aesthetic and theological interests were closely linked, Flannery O’Connor surely fell into this camp. The relationship between O’Connor’s and Dostoevsky’s “incarnational” vision of art and their use of the grotesque is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Two: From the Incarnational to the Grotesque in

O'Connor's Fiction and *Crime and Punishment*

[Shiftlet] turned his back and faced the sunset. He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross. The old woman watched him with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun, and the daughter watched, her head thrust forward and her fat helpless hands hanging at the wrists. She had long pink-gold hair and eyes as blue as a peacock's neck. (CS 146)

—Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save Might Be Your Own"

Throughout her fiction, Flannery O'Connor insists that we confront these moments. Alongside powerful, suggestive imagery—a crooked cross, deep-blue "peacock" eyes—appears unmistakable deformity. Shiftlet is missing half an arm; the daughter, mute and helpless, sits with her hands dangling at her sides. O'Connor's interpreters have long viewed her characters' physical deformities as an index of their *spiritual* deformities. Hulga's wooden leg, Claud Turpin's ulcerous leg, Rayber's deafness, Tom Shiftlet's missing arm, General Sash's senility, Mrs. McIntyre's failing health, Julian's mother's obesity, Asbury Fox's undulant fever—all of these infirmities point to failures of pride, smugness, greed, hypocrisy. Such a reading tallies with O'Connor's well-known comment that her grotesque technique was meant to assist "almost-blind" modern readers who suffered from a sort of moral myopia (MM 65). From this perspective, the function of the grotesque is decidedly negative: it measures, by degrees of distortion and monstrosity, how far her characters remain apart from their spiritual well-being.

Recent scholarship, however, has emphasized O'Connor's deeply positive understanding of the grotesque in which the prospect of renewal is present even—and sometimes especially—in the ugliest, most deformed human bodies.¹ In this view, as Christina Lake argues in her study of O'Connor's "incarnational art" (12), the essential goodness of the body stems from the Incarnation itself, from the Word becoming flesh and assuming a physical presence in the world. For O'Connor, the event of the Incarnation means that matter matters; it also means that the deformed or grotesque body, in its resemblance to the broken body of Christ, has redemptive potential. "Incarnational art," Lake writes, "insists on the broken and limited human body as its starting point – the acknowledgment of which is the only means to spiritual growth. O'Connor believed that the only way to give that body a real presence is to make it grotesque." (12).

Not surprisingly, critics have usually approached these concerns through the lens of O'Connor's Catholicism, an enterprise that, thanks to her programmatic statements of faith and her voluminous library, has yielded some impressive results.² Here, I adopt a different approach by setting her alongside Dostoevsky, a writer whose fiction contains a similarly "incarnational" vision of art. Like O'Connor, Dostoevsky places religious concerns squarely at the center of his fiction; deals with extremes of belief and unbelief, the holy and the demonic, and the sacred and the profane; and, as I will try to show, employs a strikingly similar use of the grotesque that is at once affirmative, unsettling, and redemptive.

¹ Bruce Gentry was the first critic to discuss the positive aspects of the grotesque in O'Connor's fiction; see also Lake and Srigley.

² In addition to Srigley and Lake, see Montgomery, Wood, and McMullen's edited collection *Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor*.

As “a great reader of Dostoevsky,” in the words of Norman McMillan (16), O’Connor owned many of his novels, including a Garnett translation of *Crime and Punishment*, and mentioned him in a number of letters and essays (Kinney 154). A few critics have linked his atheists, especially Ivan Karamazov, to the “innerleckshuls” that populate her fiction,³ while others have examined ways in which his “saintly” characters, especially Zosima and Myshkin, represent O’Connor’s ethical ideals.⁴ In addition, one of her favorite theologians, Romano Guardini, wrote articles on Dostoevsky with which she was familiar.⁵ In spite of these biographical details and critical remarks, however, there is no way of knowing what O’Connor really thought about Dostoevsky. In raising this comparison I assume, as most critics have assumed,⁶ that Dostoevsky did not influence O’Connor directly but rather that a number of shared concerns—especially their use of the grotesque—are borne out in their fiction. I argue that, by transforming their characters through suffering and violence, Dostoevsky and O’Connor took it as their artistic project to incorporate images of negative grotesquerie into part of a redemptive process. Their grotesque characters, far from standing exclusively as objects of disgust or repulsion, actually serve as vehicles to renewal. I read *Crime and Punishment* (1866), a text that is

³ Jessica Hooten’s recent article offers an extended comparison between Ivan and Rayber. Ralph Wood calls Hazel Motes a “countrified Karamazov” (169); Marion Montgomery discusses Ivan, Raskolnikov, and many of Dostoevsky’s other characters (*Hillbilly* 172-180, 212, 280-81, 306). The emphasis on Ivan is no doubt because O’Connor herself singles him out. “Ivan Karamazov cannot believe,” she wrote, “as long as one child is in torment” (*MM* 227).

⁴ For Srigley, O’Connor’s belief that “self-sacrificing love [is] the only way of understanding human accountability” is reminiscent of Zosima’s ethical stance in *The Brothers Karamazov* that “all are responsible for all” (2). Lake discusses the affinity between Myshkin and Bishop as “redemptive figures” (167-8).

⁵ O’Connor read Guardini’s “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” and “Dostoevsky’s Idiot, A Symbol of Christ.”

⁶ Of the dozen or so critics who have commented briefly on the similarities, none, to my knowledge, argue that Dostoevsky directly influenced O’Connor. For a list of sources that detail O’Connor’s interest in Dostoevsky, see Hooten (117-18) and McMillan (21).

particularly concerned with suffering, death, and renewal, alongside O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, and two of her final stories, "Revelation" and "Parker's Back."

II. An Overview of the Critical Debate

A stark, "either-or" polarity characterizes critical responses to both O'Connor's and Dostoevsky's fiction, many of which hinge upon a tension between the religious and the "demonic." O'Connor's bracing comic vision, her bizarre yoking of the religious and the grotesque, and her narrators' seemingly harsh vision of the world have provoked wildly disparate critical reactions. As a result, a central point of disagreement concerns the extent to which O'Connor's own account of her fiction, specifically her emphasis on the Incarnation, is consistent with what actually happens to her characters. O'Connor repeatedly stressed that her art was sacramental and incarnational, and that her fiction celebrated the material world as the manifestation of God's grace, primarily in the figure of Christ. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins she wrote that

I don't really think the standard of judgment, the missing link, you spoke of that you find in my stories emerges from any religion but Christianity, because it concerns specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. It's not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh.
(HB 226-7)

For O'Connor, the story of Christ becoming man was not understood as merely myth or symbol, as it was for many moderns, but as fact. When, for instance, an acquaintance remarked at a dinner party that she considered the Eucharist to be "a pretty good" symbol, O'Connor, who had been silent throughout the dinner, reported that "I then said,

in a very shaky voice, ‘Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.’ That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable” (*HB* 125).

The Incarnation, then, not only stressed the reality of human embodiment and limitation; it also justified the presence of the jarring, often extreme violence in her fiction. In one of her stories, a grandfather smashes his favorite grandchild’s head on a rock during a struggle. In another, an old man is stuffed between the banister rails of his apartment building and left to die. In another, a woman is gored by a bull. In another—maybe her most famous story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find”—a grandmother, her son, his wife, and three grandchildren are shot point-blank in a ditch by the side of the road. The violent fates of her characters, however unsettling, represented to O’Connor the mystery of undeserved grace: “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (*MM* 122). The body is thus recast as the site of suffering, violence, and redemption. “One of the bracing first principles of O’Connor’s work,” writes John Sykes, “is that suffering is good, not evil, as long as that suffering is identified with the redemptive suffering of Christ” (42). For the grandmother, then, a shotgun blast to the chest is precisely what she needed. “A lot of people get killed in my stories,” O’Connor once wryly remarked, “but no one gets hurt” (*HB* 223).

For readers antagonistic to or skeptical of O’Connor’s theological explanations, the pervasive violence in her fiction seems senseless at best and sadistic at worst. In none of these cases is there any immediate benefit to the sufferer beyond a brief flash of

insight. To add to the problem, O'Connor's narrators indicate their approval at the gruesome spectacles, implying that they are good rather than evil. Most famously, John Hawkes argued that O'Connor's stories, far from conforming to her own explanations, actually work toward demonic ends: "Within her luridly bright pastoral world—usually created as meaningless or indifferent or corrupted—the characters of Flannery O'Connor are judged, victimized, made to appear only as absurd entities of the flesh" (55). Many critics following Hawkes's lead have argued that, especially in her early fiction, O'Connor displays a Manichean hatred of the body—a stance diametrically opposed to her stated position.⁷ Martha Stephens, one of O'Connor's earliest interpreters and harshest critics, denounces the caricatures that pervade her fiction. The extremity of her critique is worth quoting in full:

A good indication of what must be called O'Connor's contempt for ordinary human life is the loathing with which she apparently contemplated the human body. She liked to describe faces—she hardly ever passed up an opportunity—and nearly all her faces are ugly. In the first novel, *Wise Blood*, this seems to be true without exception; human faces remind her of rodents, cats, hogs, mandrills, and vegetables; they are frog-like, hawklike, gap-toothed, mildewed, shale-textured, red-skinned, stupid, demented, and simply 'evil.' Each part of the physiognomy comes in for its share of abuse; hair is likened to dirty mops and rings of sausage—it is said to stream down the face like ham gravy. One could continue the catalog—but the point, I think, is clear. Human beings are ugly in every way; the human form itself is distinctly unpleasant to behold; human life is a sordid, almost unrelievedly hideous affair. (9-20)

Stephens articulates the kind of disgust that many of O'Connor's critics—even her supportive ones—exhibit toward her characters. There has been a significant amount of

⁷O'Connor was aware of this debate. In "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" she writes, "The Manicheans separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. This is also pretty much the modern spirit, and for the sensibility infected with it, fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art" (*MM* 68).

debate, then, on whether O'Connor's fiction is truly incarnational or Manichean, hopeful or hurtful.⁸

The same basic division characterizes critical responses to Dostoevsky's fiction. Do his novels affirm Christianity or atheism? Are they novels of hope or despair? Does Dostoevsky love or hate his characters? These questions, which have been asked repeatedly since the mid-nineteenth century, remain unsettled.⁹ Like O'Connor, Dostoevsky was a devout believer who affirmed his faith in letters and essays. But even these affirmations are uncertain. In a famous letter to Natalya Fonvizina, the woman who gave him a copy of the New Testament before his Siberian imprisonment, he writes of his passion for Christ in spite of extreme doubt:

I will tell you that I am a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt, I am that today and (I know it) will remain so until the grave. How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me and costs me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it. And yet, God sends me sometimes instants when I am completely calm; at those instants I love and I feel loved by others, and it is at these instants that I have shaped for myself a Credo where everything is clear and sacred for me. This Credo is very simple, here it is: to believe that nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly, and more perfect than Christ; and I tell myself with a jealous love not only that there is nothing but that there cannot be anything. Even more, if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.

(Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 160)

For some, Dostoevsky's choice to "remain with Christ rather than with the truth" offers proof of a courageous faith; for others, it is surefire evidence of his unbelief. One thing that his ambiguous statement *does* make clear is the importance that Dostoevsky placed

⁸ Tim Caron provides an excellent summary of the principle division in O'Connor scholarship between (his categories) "True Believers" and "Apostates." While the former group takes O'Connor at her word and assumes that a theological reading is crucial to a proper understanding of her work, the latter group attends to questions of race, class, and social justice. Speaking from an "Apostate" perspective, Caron writes that "It is difficult to imagine an author who has had a greater shaping influence in determining how her work will be received, read, and taught to subsequent generations of readers than Flannery O'Connor" (55).

⁹ Malcolm Jones (*Dynamics*) and Rowan Williams offer excellent introductions to current critical debates.

on Christ—not merely as an abstract ideal but, just the opposite, as the God-man who came into the physical world. Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, the Christ of Ivan’s “poem” *The Grand Inquisitor*, and the Marmeladovs in *Crime and Punishment* are only a few examples that reflect the centrality of the Incarnation in Dostoevsky’s fiction.

Dostoevsky also earnestly hoped that these religious convictions would appear convincingly in his novels. Perhaps most famously, he wrote to his editors during the composition of *The Brothers Karamazov* that Ivan’s powerful diatribe—the famous “Rebellion” and “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” chapters—would be “refuted” by Zosima in the next section (see chapter four). Many readers sympathetic to Christianity, or to Orthodoxy in particular, have pointed to this and other examples as evidence that Dostoevsky’s fiction, for all its contradiction and intensity, ultimately bespeaks a Christian message. One of the most prominent intellectual trends in post-Soviet Russia, as Victor Terras has noted, is “a rediscovery of Russia’s and, in particular Russian literature’s, Orthodox Christian heritage” (“Revolution” 770). With Dostoevsky standing as “the central figure” of this movement, Terras notes that “Russian scholars now joyously proclaim the Christian message of Dostoevsky’s life and works, which had been ‘under cover’ during the Soviet period” (“Revolution” 770).

On the other hand, of course, the affirmations of faith in Dostoevsky’s fiction are challenged by a mutinous crew of atheists, rebels, and skeptics who express radical doubt and even despair. Moreover, many of the most fervent believers in his fiction—those characters with whom Dostoevsky presumably placed his sympathy—suffer imprisonment (Dmitri), prostitution (Sonia), madness (Prince Myshkin), and even death (Ivan Shatov). “If Dostoevsky is proselytizing the joys of Christian belief,” writes Carol

Appolonio, “he is not doing it by direct marketing” (24). Many of his characters, from the Underground Man to Dmitri Karamazov, seem to revel in their suffering, an impulse that unsympathetic readers have extended to Dostoevsky himself. One of the earliest, most virulent of these indictments came from Nikolai Mikhailovsky, who argued in *A Cruel Talent* (1882) that Dostoevsky filled his fiction with violence and cruelty because he enjoyed watching his characters suffer. As a result, readers including Camus and D.H. Lawrence have declared that Dostoevsky’s atheists overwhelm his believers: Ivan Karamazov, not Alyosha, ultimately wins the day. In this reading Dostoevsky, like Blake’s Milton and Hawkes’s O’Connor, is a member of the devil’s party without knowing it.

To some extent, these wildly divergent assessments reproduce the double vision that pervades O’Connor’s and Dostoevsky’s fiction, in which an infernal mood alternates with the numinous, sordid material appears alongside poignant scenes of compassion, and characters oscillate from the angelic to the demonic. Stanley Hyman identified this polarity nearly fifty years ago: “as a fiction-writing theologian, [O’Connor] seems the most radical Christian dualist since Dostoevsky” (97, 100). Comments like these drive a wedge between the “orthodox” O’Connor, whose fiction follows neatly from her extra-literary statements, and the “demonic” O’Connor, whose fiction subverts her faith at every turn. What I want to suggest here is that, as Anthony Di Renzo has argued in his study on O’Connor and the medieval grotesque, there is no choosing between the “orthodox” O’Connor (or Dostoevsky) and the “demonic” one because the ostensible polarity in her fiction is actually a dialectic. Di Renzo makes this point in relation to Hawkes, who insists that O’Connor’s fiction is either demonic or angelic:

Hawkes implies that O'Connor's demonic humor sabotages her serious religious themes; but he never realizes that her religious themes themselves are not serious but humorous...we hear two kinds of laughter at once, not one; and both are equally important. That is why all attempts to interpret O'Connor exclusively along either secular or orthodox lines fail. They ignore the complicated interplay of laughter in her work. (147-8)

While Di Renzo frames this dichotomy in terms of laughter, these divisions also include belief and unbelief, death and renewal, and spirit and matter. Just as Hazel Motes proclaims that "the only way to truth is through blasphemy" (*Wise Blood* 148), so too does O'Connor sometimes suggest that the way to holiness is through degradation.

The grotesque, especially Bakhtin's notion of the term, becomes essential in this context because it enables the interplay mentioned above. The essential principle of grotesque realism, he writes, "is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (*Rabelais* 25). But degradation in this context is not necessarily negative. "To degrade an object," Bakhtin writes, "does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take places. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (*Rabelais* 5). The grotesque allowed O'Connor and Dostoevsky to preserve paradoxes and blur distinctions between the material and the ideal, the "high" and the "low." Carson McCullers had precisely this type of creative tension in mind when she provocatively claimed that, by infusing "the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail," the modern southern tradition was the "progeny" of the Russian realists ("Realists" 252). What set O'Connor apart from McCullers (and probably the rest of her

southern peers) was her profoundly incarnational sensibility, an impulse that O'Connor shared with Dostoevsky and, less obviously, with Bakhtin as well.

Bakhtin's theories of grotesque realism and dialogism have been put to good use in O'Connor studies (Donahoo 248-9). Most discussions of the positive grotesque, including Gentry's, Di Renzo's, and Lake's, employ Bakhtin. What has remained largely implicit, however, is Bakhtin's own incarnational emphasis.¹⁰ Though he was not in a position to write openly about religion, writing as he was under the Soviet censors, the language of *Rabelais and his World* and elsewhere resonates with what Ruth Coates has called "incarnational motifs" (131). Here are a few examples: "all...forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, *turn their subject into flesh* (*Rabelais* 20, my emphasis). And again: "If the image [the scatological image in *Rabelais*] is applied to the gloomy, *disincarnated* medieval truth, it symbolizes bringing it 'down to earth' through laughter" (*Rabelais* 176, my emphasis). "All of these explicit references to the Incarnation," writes Coates, "are part of Bakhtin's larger crusade against negative attitudes to the body generally" (133). The references are also part of the insistence, within Eastern Orthodoxy, that matter—*all* matter—is potentially divine.

While O'Connor did not read Bakhtin, the "incarnational motifs" that pervade his work offer another useful link between Dostoevsky, who wrote within the same Orthodox tradition, and O'Connor, whose sacramental vision likewise stressed the holiness of matter. Both traditions ultimately extend back to the medieval folk heritage of laughter, carnival, and corporeality that Di Renzo documents so well. His insight about the role of

¹⁰Bakhtin's status as a religious thinker is a particularly contentious question that is plagued, first, by an East/West divide and, second, by a regrettable lack of information about his life. Charles Lock offers an excellent discussion of both the incarnational dimensions of Bakhtin's thought and the way in which Western thinkers (for instance Kristeva) have overlooked or downplayed his Christianity. See also Clark and Holquist, especially chapter five, and Coates 1-25, 126-151.

Christ in O'Connor's fiction is equally applicable to Dostoevsky's: "the figure of Christ is the ideal behind her special satire—an ideal, however, that must be degraded as well as exalted if it is ever to be a living presence in the physical world" (44).

A final point that I want to stress is that, in my opinion, O'Connor's use of the grotesque changed over time. Whether it did or did not change is a particularly thorny issue in O'Connor scholarship. One camp, represented by Frederick Asals, thinks that her early fiction is Manichean and that her late fiction is incarnational; another camp, represented by Gentry, sees her entire *oeuvre* as essentially incarnational. As I move from O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, to her mature fiction, "Revelation" and "Parker's Back," I focus on how she shifted from depicting images of repulsion and disgust (the "negative" grotesque) to creating images imbued with redemptive potential (the "positive" grotesque). As O'Connor's use of the grotesque became more positive, so too did it conform with her (and Dostoevsky's) incarnational vision of art.

III. Raskolnikov, Haze Motes, and O'Connor's "Negative" Grotesque

Crime and Punishment (1866) and *Wise Blood* (1952) marked new starting points for both Dostoevsky and O'Connor. At this point in his career Dostoevsky had already been through a great deal. While *Poor Folk* had been lauded by Belinsky, his subsequent novel *The Double* (1846) was not as well received. Following the precipitous decline of his literary reputation, Dostoevsky was dealt the crushing double blow of being convicted of political conspiracy in 1849. For the next ten years, surely the most difficult of his life,

Dostoevsky served a four-year sentence in Omsk, a Siberian prison, followed by compulsory military service. When he returned to Saint Petersburg in 1859, Dostoevsky was thirty-eight, poor, and largely forgotten by the Russian literary scene. *Crime and Punishment*, first published in the conservative journal *The Russian Messenger* in 1866, was met with huge acclaim by the reading public and restored his reputation as a leading writer.

O'Connor began her first novel in 1948 after graduating from The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Much of her early work took place in upstate New York at Yadoo, a prestigious artist's colony where she met, among others, Robert Lowell and Katherine Anne Porter. Published in 1952 when she was only twenty-six, *Wise Blood* was met with decidedly mixed reviews. Critics from both the popular press and the smaller literary and religious presses were unsure of what to make of this first novel by a quiet, unimposing woman from Georgia. Written in a wry, sardonic style and filled with outrageous incidents, the book was apparently satiric, but the object of the satire was unclear. Most of all, no one knew what to make of the novel's central character and reluctant saint, Hazel Motes. One extreme review from the *New Republic* (one can almost picture the reviewer shaking his head in perplexity) declared that O'Connor "writes of an insane world peopled by monsters and submen, Motes the first among them...Motes is plain crazy...How then can one take his predicament seriously?" (qtd. in Gooch 212).

While both novels are strikingly different in tone and in the presentation of the grotesque, as I will discuss below, the portraits of Raskolnikov and Motes reveal the emphasis both writers place on the sensitive dialectic between belief and unbelief. Both men are isolated, alienated, and deeply divided. Outsiders by choice, they exist on the

margins of society, harboring a ridiculously stubborn faith in individual autonomy. Their self-sufficient pride requires a rejection of community that, in turn, is also a rejection of their past and their religious upbringing. Each a Christian *malgré lui*, to use O'Connor's term for Motes, both protagonists move toward redemption via negation (*Wise Blood* xi).

Raskolnikov is a bright, solitary student who has dropped out of university because he cannot afford to continue his studies; he spends his time in a cramped room in a Petersburg slum lying on his bed and thinking. For some time he has been obsessed with the idea of killing and robbing an elderly pawnbroker, a nasty old woman who profits from exploiting the impoverished people in the neighborhood. The old woman's money would not be used for his own personal gain, he reasons, but would rather be redistributed to those in need—especially Raskolnikov's mother and sister, who support him despite their own poverty. At first he cannot bring himself to convert his theory into action. But he soon learns that his sister, Dunya, is marrying a wealthy man in order to support her mother and, implicitly, Raskolnikov himself. Spurred on by this new information, which insults his proud sense of independence, he successfully carries out the murder until he is interrupted by the pawnbroker's sister Lizaveta, an innocent and kindly woman. In a fit of panic he murders her as well. The action during the rest of the novel is largely concerned with the conflict between Raskolnikov's desire to confess his crime—which, despite his earlier reasoning that his act was no crime at all, has burdened him with tremendous guilt—and his need to redeem himself in his own eyes by outsmarting the police and the brilliant detective, Porfiry.

Although the novel has many features of a murder mystery, its chief question does not concern the killer's identity but, rather, the killer's motives. No one, least of all

Raskolnikov himself, knows *why* he killed, and most of the action follows Raskolnikov's search for his own motivation. Many critics, most notably Joseph Frank, have argued that Raskolnikov's motives derive from two competing camps of Russian Nihilism.¹¹ The first motive can be traced to the social-Utopian thinker (and Dostoevsky's longtime sparring partner) Nikolai Chernyshevsky, for whom an enlightened form of self-interest called "rational egoism" offered the key to a utopian society. Chernyshevsky popularized the view, derived from Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill, that the ultimate criterion of morality was "utility" (Frank, *Miraculous* 68). Following one's personal desires—in other words, living selfishly—thus ensured the best for society as a whole. Dostoevsky's project in *Crime and Punishment* (and his previous novella *Notes from the Underground*) involved demonstrating how easily a morality based on egoism might be perverted to insidious ends. For Raskolnikov, the implications of the utilitarian position—that less valuable human lives could be sacrificed in the service of a greater good—justifies his act of murder, as he stubbornly explains to his sister: "'Crime? What crime?' he cried in a sort of sudden frenzy. 'That I killed a vile, harmful louse, an old hag of a moneylender of no use to anybody, for whose murder one should be forgiven forty sins, and who bled poor people dry, can you call that a crime? I don't think about it, and I have no wish to wipe it out'" (*Crime* 6.1, 400). In practice, of course, Raskolnikov is hardly consistent: he buries the pawnbroker's loot and hardly thinks of it afterward.

Raskolnikov clings to his utilitarian reasoning until late in the novel, when he reveals another, even more radical motivation. As Porfiry brings to his attention,

¹¹ While the term certainly carries with it connotations of atheism, Russian Nihilism also has a specific political meaning. The group was comprised of political radicals looking forward to a revolution of the existing order with no clear plans of what would follow it. Turgenev famously portrayed this nihilist ethos in Bazarov, the (anti)hero of *Fathers and Sons* (1862). See Frank's *The Miraculous Years*, especially chapters five and seven; see also Tucker's introduction.

Raskolnikov has published an article called “On Crime” in which he differentiates humanity into two categories of “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” While the vast majority of people belong to the first group, content as they are to submit to their leaders, the second, elite group (which includes legendary figures such as Napoleon, Caesar, and Mahomet) is permitted to transgress moral boundaries—with the interests of humanity in mind, of course. As Raskolnikov explains, “if such a one is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can, I maintain, find within himself, in his conscience, a sanction for wading through blood—that depends on the idea and its dimensions, note that. It’s only in that sense I speak of their right to crime in my article” (*Crime* 3.5, 236). Raskolnikov envisages himself as a Napoleonic figure who, in the interests of a distant, Utopian future, can step over moral boundaries to kill or steal.¹²

Raskolnikov’s theories are, of course, easier said than done. Throughout the novel he struggles to reconcile the innate feelings of compassion he has for the downtrodden figures of Petersburg with the prideful impulse prove his “extraordinary” individuality. His mother asks him in a letter,

Do you still say your prayers, Rodya, and believe in the mercy of our of our Creator and our Redeemer? I am afraid in my heart that you may have been visited by the new spirit of infidelity that is abroad to-day! If it is so, I pray for you. Remember, my dear boy, how in your childhood, when your father was living, you used to lisp your prayers at my knee, and how happy we all were in those days. (*Crime* 1.3, 41)

¹² This view represents the more extreme “Nihilism” of Dmitri Pisarev (1840-1868), a member of the radical journal *The Russian Word*. While Chernyshevsky was inspired by social ideals of equality and brotherhood, this second, harsher doctrine encouraged “an elite of superior individuals to step over all existing moral norms for the sake of advancing the interests of mankind as a whole” (Frank, *Miraculous* 69), a position from which even Chernyshevsky recoiled. Dostoevsky called this division “the schism among Nihilists” (Frank, *Miraculous* 69).

Raskolnikov responds with a “bitter angry smile,” a response that suggests he has surmounted his youthful ignorance. But his enlightened self is hardly able to shake off the past. As Raskolnikov makes his way through the Petersburg streets, he finds himself instinctively giving aid to people in need. These spontaneous acts of kindness are paired with sudden reversals. One day on the street, for instance, he spots a drunken, staggering girl being trailed by a lecherous dandy. Raskolnikov confronts the man, calls a policeman to intervene, and gives him twenty kopecks so that the girl may be driven safely home. But then he pauses, catches himself, and analyzes his actions in utilitarian terms: “He has carried off my twenty kopecks...Well, let him take as much from the other fellow to allow him to have the girl and so let it end. And why did I want to interfere? Is it for me to help? Have I any right to help? Let them devour each other alive—what is it to me?” (*Crime* 1.4, 52). The compassionate Raskolnikov of one moment becomes the cruel, calculating rationalist in the next, totally indifferent to the misfortunes that had stirred his pity. This morbid tangle of compassionate and misanthropic impulses precipitates an acute internal crisis that gradually intensifies until his confession.

A truism about Dostoevsky’s fiction is that it is once specific and universal, capturing the intellectual and socio-historical context of mid-nineteenth century Russia and, at same time, representing “timeless,” universal concerns. While Raskolnikov’s internal struggle is inseparable from the ideological skirmishes of 1860s Russian nihilism, it more broadly represents the tensions between the individual and the community, selfishness and love, and belief and unbelief. O’Connor’s redneck rebel, Hazel Motes, grapples with these same tensions. Less intellectual than his Russian

counterpart, Motes is a brazen protagonist-antagonist whose vehement atheism impels him to embrace his “wise blood.”

Like Raskolnikov, Haze struggles to escape the faith in which he was reared. As a young boy he hears the radical sermons of his grandfather, an itinerant evangelist. Far from being a proponent of the insipid liberal Christianity of the nineteenth century, Motes’s ancestor was “a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger” (*Wise* 20). As Motes recalls, this uncompromising zealot stung his audiences with the gospel:

They were like stones! he would shout. But Jesus had died to redeem them! Jesus was so soul-hungry that He had died, one death for all but he would have died every soul's death for one!...He would have died ten million deaths, had His arms and legs stretched on the cross and nailed ten million times for one of them? (The old man would point to his grandson, Haze)....Did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, Jesus would die ten million deaths before He would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin! Did they doubt Jesus could walk on the waters of sin? That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever...Jesus would have him in the end!
(*Wise* 21-22)

Haunted by the harsh message he received from his fundamentalist grandfather and mother, Haze has been tormented ever since. Jesus “moved from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown” (*Wise* 22).

Haze realizes that, in order to escape from his past, he must embrace his calling as a preacher—not one of salvation, but of negation. He espouses a gospel of nothingness in his own, self-invented “Church without Christ”:

I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth...no truth behind all

truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place.
(*Wise* 168).

Not a mere talker, Haze acts out his “faith” by attempting to go beyond good and evil. As he strains to practice what he preaches, Motes frantically scrambles to achieve complete autonomy: freedom from his family, community, and from God. The supreme symbol of Haze’s freedom is his ramshackle automobile. As Ralph Wood has noticed, the car serves, for both Motes and American culture, to “fulfill our fantasies of individualist autonomy, enabling us to strike out for the proverbial territories whenever the limits of social existence press in upon us. As Motes’s only sacred space, the car serves as both pulpit and residence, enabling him to incarnate his message in a life of perpetual isolation and vagabondage” (169). As he stands atop his car shouting out the message of The Church Without Christ, Motes’s car becomes his church, his message the “gospel” of autonomy.

Motes encounters a motley assortment of grotesque characters: the monstrous prostitute Leora Watts; the father and daughter preaching team, Asa Hawkes and Sabbath Lily; and his protege Enoch Emery, a bumbling fool who ends up in an apesuit. Not only Motes but the entire world of *Wise Blood* is horribly askew. The boundaries that normally define it are twisted and awry; a wide range of ingenious and perplexing metaphors conflate the animal and the mechanical with the human. Haze’s face looks “like a gun no one knew is loaded” (*Wise* 68). Enoch “looks like a friendly hound dog with light mange” (*Wise* 44). Bears at the zoo—where Haze and Enoch often visit—sit “facing each other like two matrons having tea, their faces polite and self-absorbed” (*Wise* 93). Human and animal, animate and inanimate, are yoked together in grotesque

fashion, leading William Allen to suggest that, for O'Connor, "the world, without its spiritual dimension, is merely a prison for an odd collection of inmates—a zoo for the human animal" (257).

The tone changes considerably in the final pages, as Haze's pulpit of a car is pushed over a cliff by a redneck cop, his only reason being "I don't like your face" (*Wise* 208). While this response may seem nonsensical, Gary Ciuba has pointed out that the policeman redirects Motes's gospel of individuality toward Motes himself: "Having taken the world at face value," writes Ciuba, "he himself is taken at face value" (76). Oddly enough, this event causes Haze's epiphany, as he removes the "mote" in his eye by self-blinding and lives out the remainder of his short life as a medieval saint who fills his shoes with glass in order to "pay" for his transgressions.

Raskolnikov's and Haze's nihilism, while thinkable, is not livable. It leads them to a calloused unconcern for others and a rejection of community. But, paradoxically, it also paves the way for their regeneration and may even contain a religious dimension. Jones's comments, which consider the dialectical relationship between belief and unbelief in Dostoevsky's fiction, apply just as well to O'Connor:

to do full justice to Dostoevsky's vision, we must extend the meaning of 'religious experience' to cover the whole spectrum from the fullness of belief to the desolation of unbelief, which itself has a mystical quality, and we must accept that these two extremes, though at first sight they may seem to be located at opposite poles of a continuum, often exist on each other's doorstep.
(*Dynamics* 45)

In other words, it is precisely because Motes rejects God with such vehemence that he ends up a believer. Raskolnikov's fate is less clear, although Montgomery predicts that "Raskolnikov seems poised to take the next step that Haze does" (*Hillbilly* 345).

In spite of the affinities between Raskolnikov and Haze, *Crime and Punishment* and *Wise Blood* are very different books. One obvious difference concerns the way in which each novel renders a realistic account of the story. *Crime and Punishment* contains a plausible and powerful depiction of Raskolnikov's crime. As we have seen, Dostoevsky frequently insisted that his extreme characters and situations were not "fantastic" creations but rather actualities that could be verified in Russian society. Though he would continue to defend his characters against charges of fantasticality, most readers agree that Raskolnikov is persuasive in his verisimilitude.

Wise Blood, on the other hand, often lacks convincing characterization. Although the novel has many memorable scenes, it lacks color, subtlety, complexity, and ultimately humanity. Many readers (this one included) laugh at Haze just as one laughs when Wile E. Coyote falls off a cliff in pursuit of the Roadrunner. While this comparison may seem gratuitous, many critics have noted the two-dimensionality of O'Connor's first novel. Ciuba, for instance, writes that "O'Connor avoids portraying all the features of these faces, preferring to concentrate on striking and invariably ugly physical characteristics. Here extreme selectivity and exaggeration turn characters into spiritual cartoons" (Ciuba 72). O'Connor was herself an accomplished illustrator who envisioned a dual career as both a cartoonist and a fiction writer. The student newspaper at the Georgia State College for Women carried her cartoons from Oct. 9, 1942 through her 1945 graduation; she even submitted cartoons to *The New Yorker*, although none were published.¹³ O'Connor's early aspirations of becoming an illustrator surely overlapped with the composition of her

¹³ The comics seen below appear in *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons*, a recently published collection of O'Connor's illustrations from the archives at Georgia College.

first novel; it should not be surprising that some of her creations, especially Haze and Enoch Emory, resemble cartoons rather than characters.



“You don’t mind if I get comfortable, do you?”



“Isn’t it fortunate that Genevieve has completely escaped that boy crazy stage?”



“Do you have any books the faculty doesn’t particularly recommend?”

A second difference, more crucial in the context of the present discussion, involves the role that the grotesque plays in bringing about a renewal. As I will argue more fully below, Raskolnikov eventually learns to see hope in the faces of the most downtrodden, grotesque characters. His redemption—insofar as he experiences one¹⁴—comes at the hands of the Marmeladovs, that wretched and pathetically comical unit that includes the drunkard husband, Semyon, the consumptive mother, Katerina Ivanovna, and the saintly prostitute, Sonia. In *Wise Blood*, on the other hand, O'Connor committed herself to the “negative” grotesque—to making rejection the necessary reaction of being confronted with deformity and monstrosity. O'Connor replaces Christ with a number of grotesque images, the first being the prostitute Leora Watts. First seen clipping her large, ugly toenails, Leora “was a big woman with very yellow hair and white skin that glistened with a greasy preparation” (*Wise* 33). After sleeping with her, Haze says, “What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts” (*Wise* 56). The second replacement is the shriveled “new Jesus” that Enoch steals from the museum. His gesture of bringing the mummy to Haze and Sabbath Lily leads to a powerfully grotesque scene in which Lily, unable to distinguish between the living and dead, take the new Jesus into her arms, begins to rock him, and immediately calls Haze his daddy. Haze responds by throwing the mummy out the window. The “new Jesus” cannot save anything or anyone, much less itself. Leora and the shriveled mummy have no redeeming qualities: their outward grotesquerie reflects their internal degradation. Motes is meant to recoil from their disgusting physicality.

¹⁴A great number of critics find Raskolnikov's redemption, and the epilogue to the novel, to be unconvincing and problematic. Mochulsky famously called the epilogue “a pious lie.” A good discussion of the controversy appears in Meyer.

O'Connor's presentation of the grotesque is part of an overall strategy of negation. Christ, the ideal toward which Haze inevitably moves, is never manifest, never immanent. The haunting savior appears as a "stinger" in his grandfather's head, a "pinpoint of light" at the end of a tunnel, an unrealizable ideal that is consigned to the background (*Wise* 20; 218). Christ's presence appears, paradoxically, as an absence. Because Haze's existence and the outrageous characters around him are intolerable, he has no choice but to blind himself to present reality in order to "see" beyond it. "If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more," he tells his landlady (*Wise* 222). Haze's self-blinding places him in a medieval ascetic tradition in which the material world is abrogated in favor of the next, an observation that has been used as evidence for the novel's Manicheanism.

O'Connor was apparently dissatisfied with her first portrait of grace, redemption, and the grotesque. She wrote to Betty Hester that "The failure of [*Wise Blood*] seems to be that [Haze] is not believable enough as a human being to make his blinding himself believable for the reasons that he did it. For the things that I want them to do, my characters will have to seem twice as human as humans" (*HB* 116). That O'Connor found her first novel unconvincing should not suggest that it is a failure. *Wise Blood* was the work of a young writer aspiring to define her craft. In the context of her career, the novel stands as a useful starting point because it required her to re-examine her use of the grotesque, which would become more positive. O'Connor began to see the grotesque not only as a source of disgust and revulsion—as exclusively symbolic of spiritual deformity—but also capable of change and renewal. She would eventually transform

Christ from a barely visible image in the back of Haze's mind to an icon sprawled across Obadiah Parker's back, visible for all to see.

IV. "God Made Me Thisaway": Marmeladovs, Mary Graces, and the "Positive" Grotesque

My first book was about freaks, but from now on I'm going to write about folks.

—Flannery O'Connor to Caroline Gordon (qtd. in Fitzgerald xv)

To be sure, after *Wise Blood* O'Connor would still create grotesque characters. But she grew less likely to treat them as "freaks"—as dehumanized objects, two-dimensional spiritual cartoons—than as humanized, sympathetic "folks." It is true that O'Connor sometimes saw the grotesque body as an object of revulsion. She thought that Christian writers have "the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable," as if the grotesque were always the same as the perverse or the unacceptable (*MM* 33). Elsewhere she writes that "if I despise a rotting hill, it is because I despise rot," implying that she despises her grotesque characters (*MM* 31). Comments like these suggest that any redeeming qualities of her grotesque characters are *in spite of* their grotesquerie, not *because of* it. Such a view, in my opinion, pervades *Wise Blood*.

But there is also evidence that O'Connor saw redemptive potential in the grotesque. First, she marked the text of Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* in which he discusses moments when holiness blends with the peculiar: "This setting-

apart sometimes has positive effects; it does not merely isolate, it elevates. Thus ugliness and deformities, while marking out those who possess them, at the same time make them sacred” (Kinney 78). More significantly, “a new perspective on the grotesque” came to her after hearing the story of Mary Ann, a young girl who lived her life with only one eye and a disfigured face. Upon meeting the community of nuns who cared for Mary Ann during her brief life, one of them asked O’Connor an all-too-familiar question: Why, of all things, did she write about the grotesque? “I was struggling to get off the hook,” she recalls, “when another of our guests supplied the one answer that would make it immediately plain to all of them. ‘It’s your vocation too,’ he said to her” (MM 226).

Reflecting on the guest’s comment, O’Connor remarked that

This opened up for me also a new perspective on the grotesque. Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing-down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Anne’s, full of promise....she and the Sisters who had taught her had fashioned from her unfinished face the material of her death...it is a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state. (MM 226)

Too often had she focused on the negative side of the grotesque—its capacity for distortion, ugliness, and evil— to recognize that, when looking at the good, “its face too is grotesque.”

The most important evidence that O’Connor saw positive qualities in the grotesque appears in her mature fiction. In “Temple of the Holy Ghost,” two young girls go to the fair and see a hermaphrodite, whose acceptance of his/her deformed body mirrors O’Connor’s own. “God made me thisaway,” the hermaphrodite tells the girls, “and if you

laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way. I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute hit" (CS 245). As the "agent of grace" in the story, to use O'Connor's preferred term, the grotesque character at the fair serves as a vehicle to the girl's redemption. At the end of the story, instead of repeating her prayers mechanically, the girl has an epiphany. "Hep me not to be so mean," she prays (CS 248).

In what follows, I link O'Connor's deployment of the grotesque in "Revelation" and "Parker's Back" to Dostoevsky's, who often places the source of redemption in his most grotesque, downtrodden characters. In "Dostoevskian Vision in Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation,'" McMillan suggests that O'Connor was particularly drawn to Dostoevsky when she wrote the story in the summer of 1963. Before she wrote the story O'Connor mentioned that she intended to read Dostoevsky during the summer (HB 515). While there is no way of knowing if she had his novel in mind, of course, Marmeladov's and Ruby's visions share striking affinities and offer a useful entry point into a discussion of O'Connor's and Dostoevsky's positive grotesque.

Wart-Hogs and Revelations

After his first visit with the pawnbroker, Raskolnikov ducks into a tavern and finds Marmeladov, a down-and-out drunkard who has "nowhere to go," "no one to go to" (*Crime* 1.2, 17).¹⁵ The burly, red-faced man is bloated from five days of ceaseless

¹⁵Raskolnikov's "chance" meeting with Marmeladov, which in turn introduces him to the rest of the family, is only one of numerous incidents in which Raskolnikov happens to be in the right (or wrong) place at the

drinking and filthy from sleeping on a hay barge on the Neva. His appearance, obviously grotesque, reveals “the yellow, even greenish, bloated face of the confirmed drunkard, and swollen eyelids out of which, as though through two narrow slits, shone a pair of tiny but animated reddish eyes” (*Crime* 1.2, 15). In spite of his sallow, ramshackle appearance, Marmeladov speaks in an elevated style that becomes even more ridiculous when he talks about his life. He admits that alcohol has ruined his family. His wife, Katerina Ivanovna, is a consumptive, bitter woman who, because of her husband’s negligence, has raised their children on her own. In order to fund his drinking habit Marmeladov sells his wife’s stockings while his beloved daughter, Sonia, is forced to take the yellow ticket of prostitution.

Though Marmeladov is a lost soul, he is also a clown. The chaotic disappearance of the family possessions, all bargained for booze, injects a humorous disorder into his efforts to give a coherent account of himself. All of these details, which he divulges without stint, even with a hint of pride, make him the object of mockery in the tavern. Yet, unlike the scoffing crowd, Marmeladov himself shows a measure of sensitivity, immediately reading some trouble in Raskolnikov’s face. Even as he acknowledges his own degraded status, Marmeladov sees in the young student someone to whom, perhaps, he can provide comfort. Marmeladov’s parody of Christ, his riotous degradation of the divine, stamps an indelible mark on Raskolnikov’s conscience.

“Behold the man,” he exclaims (*Crime* 1.2, 15), quoting the words of Pontius Pilate before he delivered Christ up to be crucified (John 19:5). At the very mention of this divine model Marmeladov, as if aware of his own unworthiness, berates himself: “I

right time. Another example is when he wanders the marketplace and learns, quite accidentally, that the pawnbroker will be alone, enabling his murder. These moments underscore the tension between the coincidence of the murder and its determinism.

have the semblance of a beast...I am a beast by nature!" (*Crime* 1.2, 15). Striving to approach Christ, he imitates the proclamatory style, interweaving biblical quotations with his own speech; he shapes all his words in the hope of ultimately being heard, understood and forgiven. Marmeladov is so attuned to this highest voice that he envisions Christ present in the room and begins an impersonation:

He will come in that day and He will ask: "Where is the daughter who gave herself for her cross, consumptive stepmother and for the little children of another? Where is the daughter who had pity upon the filthy drunkard, her earthly father, undismayed by his beastliness?"...and he will forgive my Sonia.
(*Crime* 1.2, 26)

This moment, as with so many others in Dostoevsky's fiction, contains what Bakhtin called the "double-voiced" word: Marmeladov recasts the words of another—Christ—in a radically different context. By taking on Christ's words he transforms the message from a solemn liturgy into his own milieu of destitute, humiliated people. Diane Thompson suggests that this strategy "is consonant with Dostoevsky's poetics and his extraordinarily powerful feeling for the Incarnation...this carnivalised situation is in complete accord with the Christian spirit; Christ lived among the lowest classes, mingling with sinners, social outcasts, the poor, the downtrodden and humiliated" (71-2). The Word can be formed within degradation, laughter, and ignominy—even in the seedy corner of a Petersburg bar.¹⁶

In his highest moment of intensity and eloquence, Marmeladov's speech culminates in a vision of the Last Judgment when, as he puts it, "God will call forth the

¹⁶As Lock notes in his discussion of Bakhtin's relation to Orthodoxy theology, which holds that all matter is potentially divine, "all words are potentially the Word...There can be no privileging of discourses, nor among discourses: the Word lurks in words, not in some words rather than in others but in all words in all their unsystematic random dispersal, in the uncontrollable centrifugal momentum of utterance" (72-3).

blessed to be with him in Paradise” (*Crime* 1.2, 26). After describing how God’s pity will extend to Sonia, he turns to the fate of himself and others like him:

And when He has done with all of them, then He will summon us. ‘You too come forth,’ He will say, ‘Come forth, ye drunkards, come forth, ye weak ones, come forth, ye children of shame!’ And we shall come forth without shame and shall stand before Him. And He will say unto us, ‘Ye are swine made in the image of the Beast and with his mark; but come ye also!’ And the wise ones and those of understanding will say, ‘O Lord, why dost thou receive these men?’ And He will say, ‘This is why I receive them, O ye wise, this is why I receive them, O ye of understanding, that not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this.’ And He will hold out His hands to us and we shall fall down before Him....and we shall weep....and we shall understand all things! Then we shall understand all!.... and all will understand, Katerina Ivanovna even... .she will understand... Lord, Thy kingdom come!”
(*Crime* 1.2, 26)

In spite of his status as an irresponsible, reprehensible drunk whose actions ensure a horrible life for his family, Marmeladov grasps what the others in the bar (including Raskolnikov) do not: that earthly and divine standards of judgment are worlds apart. Marmeladov’s vision, which presents an image of infinite redemption, arises from his knowledge of infinite debasement. Marmeladov lowers himself in order to rise up, implicitly linking himself with Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Dostoevsky thus decenters, desecrates, and “bring[s] down to earth” the ideal (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 20). The ideal is not destroyed but preserved, as Gentry notes: “the ideal that is grotesquely degraded is not obliterated: the grotesque retains traces of the ideal. The retained connection between the ideal and the grotesque is a reformation of the ideal. The process does not end there, however, for when the grotesque reestablishes an ideal, the ideal must again be desecrated” (17).

This moment is significant not only for Marmeladov, who desperately hopes that he will be saved, but also for Raskolnikov, who witnesses the entire scene in a somewhat dumbfounded manner. No longer able to lie on his bed thinking in abstractions,

Raskolnikov must confront his theory in the flesh. By all accounts Marmeladov would qualify as one of the worthless humans who should be brushed aside in the interests of humanity. His drunkenness, negligence, and debasement would justify it. But at the same time he plants within Raskolnikov the suspicion that individuals resist quantitative reduction. Their meeting expresses Raskolnikov's hidden desire to be rejoined with the society from which he severed himself. Marmeladov's confession of how he has mistreated his family, of his drinking and other the theft of money, is also a burlesque foreshadowing of Raskolnikov's later penance, when he confesses to Sonia, kisses the earth, and admits his crime at the police station.

Ruby Turpin experiences a flash of insight remarkably similar to Marmeladov's. One important difference between the characters, as McMillan notes, is that "Dostoevsky shows us Marmeladov only after he has learned the truth, while O'Connor makes us struggle through Mrs. Turpin's whole painful process of spiritual growth" (21). Ruby's "revelation" does not occur until the very end of the story, most of which happens in a doctor's office. From the start, when Turpin enters the small, crowded waiting room, she begins sizing up its occupants according to her notions of social class. Ruby is no Haze Motes: she is already convinced of her divine election and revels in her belief that she is a chosen one. This spiritual smugness manifests itself in all of her social interactions, from her subtle comments to the others in the waiting room to her internal musings before bed, when she occupies herself by naming the different classes of people:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land.
(CS 491)

Ruby's system of valuation resembles Raskolnikov's, whose quantitative mind selects a few "extraordinary," Napoleon-like individuals and throws the rest onto the "heap" of poverty and mediocrity (CS 491). Standing alongside O'Connor's narrator, we see Mrs. Turpin for what she is: a smug, self-righteous bigot who, at this point, has achieved none of Marmeladov's self-knowledge.

Ruby's "revelation" comes, as it often does in O'Connor's fiction, from the most unexpected of places: a scowling, ugly, fat girl with an acne-scarred face named (aptly) Mary Grace, who is home from college for the summer. The more Mrs. Turpin chatters away in the waiting room, the more Mary Grace smirks, smolders, and blazes. She fixes her eyes "like drills" on Mrs. Turpin, who is baffled and discomfited by the intense glare. With a bit of effort, Ruby pushes the girl out of her mind and begins thinking, once more, about her fine life. Her enthusiasm bubbling over, she can no longer contain herself: "'Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!' she cried aloud" (CS 499). This is the last straw. Upon hearing Ruby's sanctimonious cries of joy, Mary Grace chucks a book at Ruby, hitting her just above the eye, and gives her some parting advice: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (CS 499; 500). Unable to push the comment out of her mind, Ruby begins a gradual self-examination: "How am I a hog and me both?" (CS 506).

The presence of hog imagery in both scenes is interesting. Marmeladov labels himself a "pig," a "beast," and "swine" (*Crime* 1.2, 18, 20, 26) while Mary Grace calls Turpin a "wart-hog" (CS 500). Indeed, much of "Revelation" implicitly associates hogs with humans, especially the notion that no amount of "cleaning up" will permanently wash away a hog's dirtiness or a human's sinfulness. Ruby suppresses this insight,

believing instead that, like her own well-kempt appearance, her hogs remain squeaky-clean in their parlor. She is also quick to associate the filthiness of hogs in general with both the white-trash woman's child ("a poor nasty little thing") and the lower-class whites and blacks who "lounge about the sidewalks all day" and "lay down in the middle of the road and stop traffic. Roll around on the ground" (CS 493; 507). Both the white-trash woman and Mary Grace see things quite differently. Although Ruby's pigs live in a parlor ("their feet never touch the ground") and are "scoot[ed] down with the hose every afternoon" (CS 493), hogs are nevertheless *hogs*; they are, as the white-trash woman calls them, "nasty, stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rooting all over the place" (CS 493). So too does Mary Grace's "wart-hog" comment consign Ruby to the ranks of the dirty, undesirable whites and blacks from whom Ruby seeks to distance herself. On the one hand, then, the hogs represent the ugly, dirty side of humanity. Di Renzo speculates that "hogs are a puzzling and ambiguous symbol in Christian iconography, neither holy nor unholy. Perhaps they represent the polymorphously perverse side of human nature—that which is beastly, impish, shameless, self-satisfied, incorrigible, and plug-ugly in each of us" (218).

Yet there is also real value, perhaps even a strange kind of beauty, in those fat hogs who "pant with a secret life" in Ruby's parlor (CS 508). The hog-to-people parallel surfaces again at the end of the story, when it appears that God inspects Ruby just as a farmer inspects his pigs: "The sun was behind the wood, very red, looking over the paling of trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs" (CS 507). The sun, which O'Connor often associated with God (*HB* 345), suffuses the pig parlor with a glowing, red light. No longer exclusively ugly, the pigs huddle together in warmth, community, and comfort. A

fascinating metaphor unites hogs, humans, and farmers: just as Ruby stares at the hogs, so too does God inspect Ruby, who appears ugly *and* attractive. By introducing Ruby's vision alongside the hog parlor, O'Connor transforms a traditionally unclean location—a pigpen—into the site of a numinous experience.:

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, coming through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. (CS 508)

In her vision, which is also a re-imagining of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), Ruby finally perceives that she, not Mary Grace, is grotesque; she, not the acne-scarred girl, is the true monstrosity, the “wart-hog.” Like that of Marmeladov, Ruby's vision dismantles her view of the world as neatly divided into categories of clean and unclean, white and black.

Dostoevsky and O'Connor invite us to consider how outside eyes might give lives radically different value than what we ourselves choose to assign. Turpin's and Marmeladov's grotesque attributes are transformed, via self-knowledge, into an ugliness that can be instructive and even redemptive. While Marmeladov's redemption is arguably more important to those around him—to his starving children, Sonia, and most of all, to

Raskolnikov—Ruby’s transformation, on the other hand, is largely intrapersonal. At the end of the story, she occupies a liminal space in which she is both clean and unclean, saved and lost, “normal” and grotesque. We might reformulate Ruby’s reflection about hogs from a question to a statement: she is indeed “a hog and me both.” One cannot take only the degradation or the redemption; both appear as a single, grotesque truth.

V. Living Icons in *Crime and Punishment* and “Parker’s Back”

As we have seen, Raskolnikov’s path to redemption depends on his meeting with Semyon Marmeladov, whose suffering parodies and to some degree prefigures Raskolnikov’s tumultuous experience. But it is Semyon’s daughter, Sonia, who saves Raskolnikov from isolation and spiritual death, culminating in the famous confession scene in which she reads to him the story of Lazarus at surprising length. As many critics have noted, the Lazarus subtext in *Crime and Punishment* is part of an “Easter motif” that reflects Dostoevsky’s concerns with death and renewal (Jones 36-40; Murav 66-70; Meyer 69-79). Indeed, the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamazov* of the seed dying and bringing forth fruit (John 12:24) might well stand as the preface to Dostoevsky’s entire *oeuvre*. Dostoevsky’s symbolic use of iconography invites a comparison with “Parker’s Back,” O’Connor’s final story in which an Orthodox iconographic image, a tattoo of the Byzantine Christ, stands as her final statement on the potential of incarnational art and the positive grotesque.

It may seem odd that, as a Catholic living in the Protestant South, O'Connor chose an icon from Eastern Orthodoxy, the Pantocrator Christ, as the governing image in her final story. However, as Jaqueline Zubeck argues convincingly in her discussion of Orthodoxy in "Parker's Back," O'Connor found certain aspects of Orthodoxy appealing, especially its reverence of icons: "Placing the icon on the back of her last protagonist constitutes a summing up and blessing of her own work, so that the icon can be thought of as a *consummating image* for the author, something which makes manifest her profound belief that the Incarnation is a mystery to be found in everyday manners" (92). O'Connor cultivated an interest in Eastern Orthodoxy late in life. Along with the letters exchanged with a friend about the Byzantine rites, O'Connor also owned a copy of George Burchett's *Memoirs of a Tattooist* that discussed the intersection between tattoos and religious belief as it was practiced by members of the Orthodox Church.¹⁷ As a form of worship at once material, prosaic, and experiential, icons were thought to be not only aesthetically appropriate but also theologically sound. But the icon also held a specifically *literary* appeal to O'Connor. As a material image of the divine, the icon functions as an intermediate zone between the visible and the invisible world (Tucker 104). The icon thus stood as an extremely useful tool for a "realist of distances" whose goal was to "look for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees" (*MM* 42). This heightened way of seeing—elsewhere O'Connor called it prophetic vision (*MM*

¹⁷ She underlined the following passage: "Strangely, it was the Church that encouraged tattooing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though this was confined to the Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox denominations. Today many priests of the Coptic Church are tattooed, and religious designs tattooed on the forearm or chest have been traditional for two centuries with the Serbians, Bulgarians and Catholic Eurasians"(qtd. In Zubeck 18).

44)—can be further understood as properly focusing two sets of eyes, the artist’s and the Church’s, in order to see both the visible and the invisible world. Thus her use of the Byzantine icon, as part of her broader artistic project, involved making the spiritual world apparent to those who could not—or would not—see it.

Many, if not all, of these aspects of iconography appear throughout Dostoevsky’s fiction, which further suggests why O’Connor was drawn to it. It is clear from his notebooks to *Crime and Punishment* that Dostoevsky intended to capture “The Orthodox point of view; what Orthodoxy consists of” (188). Moreover, Dostoevsky’s “fantastic realism,” with its emphasis on multilayered or “deeper” levels of reality, is strikingly similar to O’Connor’s “realism of distances.” It is worth repeating, however, that the question of whether Dostoevsky’s fiction is “religious,” or whether his fiction represents Orthodoxy, is extremely vexed. One important reason, as Jones argues at length, is because the presence of Orthodoxy in his fiction is either ambiguous or absent: “In Dostoevsky’s major novels, although Easter plays a recurrent symbolic role in characters’ memories, Church attendance, and therefore active participation in the Orthodox liturgy and sacraments by any of his character...is extremely rare” (*Dynamics* 36). He adds that “Many of the most visible and distinctive features of the institutional and doctrinal life of Eastern Orthodoxy, the sacramental, the material, the ritual, the institutional, are either peripheral or occasional in Dostoevsky’s mature art” (*Dynamics* 40).

To be sure, literal icons rarely appear in *Crime and Punishment*. Neither do any characters, even the religious ones, go to church. But, as Janet Tucker and others have pointed out, Dostoevsky uses characterization, visual space, and the city of Petersburg itself to create a substructure of religious iconic imagery that is “hidden” in plain sight:

“The superficially visible world is the city environment of slums, dirty streets, prostitution—and murder. The invisible world accessed through iconic imagery—which the reader can sense beneath the surface—is the realm of belief, unseen yet palpably present in the form of symbols associate with the icon and iconic constructs” (99, 103). This insight does not contradict Jones’s point above, but supports his broader argument that Orthodoxy exists submerged beneath the surface. “We may conclude,” he writes, “that it is not so much that Russian Orthodoxy bathes Dostoevsky’s imaginative fiction in its light as that it flickers fitfully from time to time in varying guises and contexts” (41). Thus Dostoevsky’s use of icons is largely symbolic, whereas O’Connor’s is strikingly literal. Both authors share the idea that, as living icons, an inarticulate prostitute or an aimless husband can serve as an impetus for renewal.

The hidden message of religious grace in *Crime and Punishment* appears through its recasting of one of Russia’s most popular parables and icons, the story of Lazarus, within the backdrop of the modern city. In the Orthodox imagination, ladder-staircases in the urban environment of Petersburg function not only practically, physically linking multi-storied buildings, but also symbolically, connecting the mundane realm with the “higher,” spiritual world (Tucker 104). These stairs have special significance for Raskolnikov, whose poverty forces him to live at the very top of a five-storied building. The room itself is ridiculously small. Upon visiting him, his mother remarks, “What a wretched lodging you have, Rodya! It’s like a tomb” (*Crime* 3.3, 211). While his mother may, on the surface, have her son’s financial concerns in mind, she also unwittingly points to the religious underpinnings of the novel: Raskolnikov is “entombed,” like Lazarus, in his tiny apartment.

Sonia also lives in a cramped, tomb-like space that is crookedly angled, as Raskolnikov observes: “it was a very irregular quadrangle and this gave it a grotesque appearance. A wall with three windows looking out on to the canal ran aslant so that one corner formed a very acute angle, and it was difficult to see in it without very strong light. The other corner was disproportionately obtuse” (*Crime* 4.4, 282). Harriet Murav notes that the word used to describe Sonia’s room, *urodlivoe* or “deformed,” is closely related to *iurodivaia*, the feminine for “holy fool,” a term that Raskolnikov applies to Sonia (66). Her face, like the room, is oddly askew; he suspects that something is deformed about her as well. Sonia is indeed in a depraved situation, for she has been forced into prostitution by her step-mother in order to support the family. To Raskolnikov, the sacrifice that she has made of herself is foolish. He concludes that suicide, madness, or complete depravity are her only options. Throughout their meetings Raskolnikov’s “new word,” the belief that he can transform himself into a superman, competes with Sonia’s redemptive “word” of the Gospel, the Word made flesh that, in the passage she reads to Raskolnikov, brings Lazarus back to life.

Yet Sonia’s impact on Raskolnikov comes not principally from what she says, but how she appears. Without the Gospels in front of her, which she knows by heart, Sonia is terribly inarticulate. Whereas her father is inspired by bouts of intense eloquence, Sonia remains silent; she appears as a living icon who, in Tucker’s words, “incorporates the Word in the image, allowing the Word to be expressed while still unuttered” (102). Above all, Raskolnikov *looks* at Sonia. After she finishes reading the Lazarus story, Raskolnikov clutches her by the arm and peers into her “weeping” face (*Crime* 4.4, 297). He kneels before her, as one would kneel before an icon, and kisses her feet, explaining

that he is “bowing before all of suffering humanity” (*Crime* 4.4, 297). When he visits her for the last time, Raskolnikov tells himself that he needs desperately to “look at her suffering,” to “look” at a person (*Crime* 6.8, 463). At the very end of the novel, when he is about to exit the police station without having confessed, he pauses in the street, seeing Sonia in the crowd, and stares back at her: “There was a look of poignant agony, of despair, in her face” (*Crime* 6.8, 469). It is precisely Sonia’s silence, her presence as a living icon, that compels Raskolnikov to confess his crime.

The living icon in “Parker’s Back,” Obadiah Elihue Parker, spends most of his time working, playing pool, and wondering why he married his grouch of a wife, Sarah Ruth. His moment of recognition occurs when he sees an image of prosaic beauty in a most unexpected form and place: a tattoo-covered man at the fair. Covered from head to toe with exotic designs, the man is a grotesque specimen to behold: “Except for his loins which were girded with a panther hide, the man’s skin was patterned in what seemed from Parker’s distance...a single intricate design of brilliant color. The man, who was small and sturdy, moved about on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of their own” (CS 512-13). Here, as in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O’Connor uses the carnival space as a site of illumination in which classic standards of beauty are challenged and inverted. From the tattooed man “flexing his muscles” to the hermaphrodite affirming that “God made me thisaway,” we witness two characters celebrating their bodies without apology (CS 512, 245). Parker soon follows suit, adorning his body with a motley assortment of inanimate and animate objects—culminating, of course, with the divine image of Christ on his back. I agree with Sarah Gordon that Parker’s interest in tattoos “is

O'Connor's way of dramatizing his wonder at creation, his need to celebrate it in the only way he knows how" (248).

The tattooed man, the hermaphrodite, and Parker all represent, in different ways, the "new perspective on the grotesque" that O'Connor outlined in her "Introduction to a Memoir of Mary Ann." Parker's Byzantine Christ tattoo demonstrates just how far O'Connor's grotesque technique had changed from her early fiction, especially *Wise Blood*. The images that replace Christ in her first novel—the "new Jesus" mummy, a monstrous prostitute, the "wild ragged figure" in the back of Haze's mind (*WB* 22)—are themselves replaced by the iconographic image sprawled across Parker's back. Lake calls the story "O'Connor's most mature expression of the grotesque beauty of art driven by the Incarnation and of the human body as validated by it" (222).

It takes a tractor accident, in which Parker accidentally drives into a tree that bursts into flames, for him to make a radical decision: he goes to the tattoo artist and requests an image of God on his back. "I don't care which one," Parker says (*CS* 516). As Dostoevsky remarked in "Mr. __bov and the Question of Art," his most important public statement on aesthetics,

The need for beauty develops most strongly when man is in disaccord with reality, in discordance, in struggle, that is, when he lives must fully, for the moment at which man lives most fully is when he is seeking something, when he wishes to attain something; it is then that he displays the most natural desire for everything that is harmonious and serene, and in beauty there is harmony and serenity.

(Frank, *Liberation* 82)

Parker's decision to get the tattoo stems not only from his experience at the fair and from his crisis culminating in the burning tree, but also from a desire to attract his wife. This impulse is, of course, to the great chagrin of Sarah Ruth, who represents the unflinching

position of the iconoclasts and a stringent Manicheanism (Gordon 250).¹⁸ Much critical discussion centers on types of looking in the story, especially the contrast (or affinity) between Sarah Ruth's "icepick eyes" and the "all-demanding eyes" of the tattoo. (*CS* 524; 522). I agree with Gordon and Zubeck that the Byzantine Christ's eyes are qualitatively different than Sarah Ruth's; they are "eyes to be obeyed" instead of eyes that demolish and judge (*CS* 527).

But there is another arresting aspect of iconography at work here: as an icon, the Byzantine Christ's eyes penetrate Parker without words—that is, through silence. Here, O'Connor's suggestive use of non-verbal communication is reminiscent not only of Sonia, who rarely speaks, but also of the mute Christ of Ivan's "Legend" who responds with only a silent kiss on the old Inquisitor's lips. Parker himself experiences this shift from speech to silence. No longer the buffoon who yells "GOD ABOVE!" at the top of his lungs (*CS* 520), Parker calmly entreats his wife to stop talking and look at his tattoo: "'Shut your mouth,' he said quietly. 'Look at this and then I don't want to hear no more out of you'" (*CS* 529). The contrast between Sarah Ruth's speech and Parker's newfound reticence is most distinct in the final scene, when she thrashes Parker with a broom, yelling and screaming "Idolatry!...Idolatry!" (*CS* 529), while her husband silently submits to the blows raining down upon him.

This final image of Parker, who shares in the suffering of Christ, parallels the anguish that Raskolnikov experiences after he kills the pawnbroker and her sister. Indeed, the notion that O'Connor's characters achieve an epiphany only after intense personal suffering, whether physical or mental, has been linked to Dostoevsky's assertion that

¹⁸As O'Connor herself affirmed in a letter to Betty Hester, Sarah Ruth was a "heretic" because she had adopted "the notion that you can worship in pure spirit" (*HB* 594).

“happiness is purchased through suffering” (*Notebooks* 188). Di Renzo, for instance, writes that “like Dostoevsky, O’Connor believes that her characters need to experience suffering firsthand if they are ever to become authentic in an unjust world. The pain of being mortal and vulnerable is the one thing that teaches them pity and humility. This stark compassion, this Christ-like identification with the insulted and the injured, becomes possible in O’Connor’s fiction only when her characters are broken” (41-2). Raskolnikov and Parker are temporarily broken, to be sure, but their lives are salvageable. I would not go as far as Marion Montgomery, who predicts that “Raskolnikov seems about to enter upon a journey not unlike that of Haze in Haze’s final hours” (*Hillbilly* 281). He seems to me less like Haze or Sarah Ruth, who are repulsed by the material world, and more like Parker, who is concerned with *this* life. In spite of the controversial epilogue that many critics have found unconvincing or “monologic,” Dostoevsky emphasizes that Raskolnikov’s conversion (if it indeed occurs) “is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of passing from one world to another, of his initiation into a new unknown life” (*Crime* 7.1, 484). His focus is not one of renunciation or otherworldly asceticism, but of building a future life with Sonia. So too is O’Connor’s final story marked by its suggestive irresolution. Bawling like a new-born baby, Parker is poised to begin a new chapter: perhaps he will reconcile with Sarah Ruth, perhaps not. His full story remains untold.

As I have tried to show, O’Connor’s positive use of the grotesque and incarnational vision of art bear strong resemblances to Dostoevsky’s artistic approach, which is likewise concerned with the intersection between violence, suffering, and

renewal. Readers will surely continue to see great cruelty and profound love in the same images of tormented intellectuals, drunken fathers, lowly prostitutes, and deformed children. In my opinion these images sometimes, but not always, are infused with hope. Through an epiphanic moment—often a dream or a revelation—O'Connor's and Dostoevsky's characters struggle to transcend their self-interest and rejoin the community from which they severed themselves. The lurid details of their fallen fictional worlds, the despairing characters, jarring violence, and deformed bodies, hint at and even give way to the message of hope that inheres there, suggesting that renewal is not achieved apart from grotesquerie, but through it.

Chapter Three

Finding Dostoevsky's "Idiot" in the Fiction of Carson McCullers

The books of Dostoevski—*The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot*—opened the door to an immense and marvelous new world. For years I had seen these books on the shelves of the public library, but on examining them I had been so put off by the indigestible names and the small print. So when at last I read Dostoevski it was a shock that I shall never forget—and the same amazement takes hold of me whenever I read these books today, a sense of wonder that cannot be jaded by familiarity.

—Carson McCullers ("Books I Remember" 122)

For Carson McCullers, the "shock" of reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels for the first time would resonate throughout her essays, personal life, and fiction. She came to him early—at thirteen—when she read the "great Russians" and dreamed of far-away places outside the South.¹ Only five years later, in "Russian Realists and Southern Literature" (1941), McCullers boldly pointed out the affinities between her own school of southern writers and the Russian realists, especially Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Beyond these rather general remarks expressing her appreciation for Dostoevsky, on at least two other occasions McCullers framed her tumultuous personal life in terms of Prince Myshkin, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1868). In *Illumination and Nightglare* (1999) she discusses her first impressions of Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenback, the Swiss author whom McCullers pursued romantically (without success) when they met in New York in 1940: "As Annemarie was bodily resplendent I

¹"That was the year of Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Tolstoy," she recalls, "and there were the intimations of an unsuspected region equidistant from New York. Old Russia and our Georgia rooms, the marvelous solitary region of simple stories and the inward mind" ("Books I Remember" 122). Elsewhere she writes that, along with Tolstoy, "One of the strongest influences in my reading life is [Dostoevsky]" (*Illumination* 59).

could only think of [Myshkin's] meeting with [Natasya Filipovna] in the "Idiot," in which he experienced 'terror, pity and love'" (21). She also mentioned the novel to David Diamond, the composer and violinist with whom she and her husband Reeves had an erotic, triangulated affair. In a 1941 letter, "Carson asked Diamond if he had read Dostoevski's *The Idiot* recently, and if so, he would understand what she meant when she said that she had felt like a cross between Rogozhin and Myshkin" (Carr 169). Neither Carr nor McCullers gives any indication of what it could mean to feel like "a cross between" the two men or, more broadly, to understand how Myshkin inspired McCullers's fiction.

In spite of these references to Dostoevsky in her memoirs and letters, critics have tended to overlook his impact on McCullers.² This chapter suggests that McCullers found in Dostoevsky's fiction—especially in *The Idiot*—a model for her own treatment of love, spiritual isolation, and silent desire. In making this comparison I also assume that McCullers's hopes and fears were directed outward toward the Northeast, where she lived and wrote at Yaddo and Nyack; toward Europe, where Reeves was stationed during the Second World War; and toward Russia, where she felt a literary kinship that crossed national boundaries.

As two characters who embody a strange mixture of saintliness and incapacity, Myshkin and John Singer are best understood through the lens of the grotesque, a technique that conveys both spiritual alienation and, as Sarah Gleeson-White puts it, the

² A few scattered comments do exist. Oliver Evans points out John Singer's resemblance to Myshkin (70-85), which I discuss below. General comparisons between McCullers and Dostoevsky appear in Bloshteyn (1-15) and Pachmuss. Rowan Williams notes, in a tantalizingly brief footnote, that "It is worth comparing the shadows around the role of Myshkin in *The Idiot* with the complex central character, the deaf-mute, in Carson McCullers, *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter*" (Grace 146). To my knowledge, no existing studies focus exclusively on Dostoevsky's impact on McCullers.

“affirming qualities” of the deformed body (“Revisiting” 109). As I will try to show, in both novels the tension between the metaphysical and the material dimensions of the grotesque (specifically between ideal and erotic love) is preserved through suggestive moments of silence. Myshkin and Singer are compelling because they invite questions about faith and religion that are *linked to* tremendous confusion about their bodies and their sexuality. The failures of speech that accompany this confusion—signing, stammering, stuttering, convulsing—are themselves types of expression, different ways of “un-saying.” In this respect Dostoevsky’s emphasis on paradox, intuitive knowledge, and visual rather than spoken forms of communication in *The Idiot* mirrors the similarly apophatic dimension of McCullers’s fiction. Before turning to McCullers’s “Russian novel,” in the words of her friend and biographer Oliver Evans (71), I begin with an introduction to Myshkin, the enigmatic hero of *The Idiot*.

II. From *The Idiot* to *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter*

Of all his novels, *The Idiot* came hardest for Dostoevsky. In 1867, after being harassed for money by petulant in-laws and threatened by creditors with imprisonment, Dostoevsky fled to Europe with his wife, Anna, in search of peace and rest. Unfortunately, he found neither. Dostoevsky’s financial problems worsened—in part because of his disastrous gambling sprees—and his epileptic fits intensified. Worst of all, the Dostoevskys lost their first child, three-month-old Sofya, when she caught a chill

during an afternoon walk in Vevey, Switzerland. As a result, *The Idiot* was written while Dostoevsky was far from home, constantly on the move, and wracked by financial pressures, ill health, and the loss of his beloved daughter—conditions that all found their way into the novel, from its scattered composition to its themes of unrequited love and premature death.³ At the same time, Dostoevsky placed an extraordinary amount of hope in the novel, which alone could save him from ruin. On the one hand, finishing *The Idiot* would provide him with money to pay his debts and return to Russia. On the other, as he expressed in a letter to his friend Maikov, it also had the potential to communicate an “idea” of the most crucial importance: “For a long time already, there was an idea that had been bothering me, but I was afraid to make a novel out of it because it was a very difficult idea and I was not ready to tackle it...The idea is—to *portray a perfectly beautiful man*” (Frank, *Miraculous* 271; italics in original).

This “perfectly beautiful man” is Prince Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin, the enigmatic hero who first appears huddled, tired, and cold on a train heading to Saint Petersburg. About twenty-six or twenty-seven, Myshkin is “just above the average in height, with very fair thick hair, with sunken cheeks and a thin, pointed, almost white little beard. His eyes were large, blue and intent; there was something gentle, though heavy-looking in their expression, something of that strange look from which some people can recognize at the first glance a victim of epilepsy” (*Idiot* 1.1, 5-6). On the train he sits next to a wealthy merchant’s son, Rogozhin, and a nosy, servile man named Lebyedev; eventually they strike up a conversation. In spite of Rogozhin and Lebyedev’s sneering condescension,

³ For an author who was known as an uneven stylist, *The Idiot* is perhaps the most disordered of Dostoevsky’s novels; much of it was written from scene to scene with only the loosest sort of plot. Here I present a condensed version of the story that focuses on the Myshkin-Rogozhin-Nastasya love triangle. For a comprehensive discussion of the conception of the novel and its plot, see Wasiolek’s introduction.

Myshkin readily answers their questions about his childhood, his family, and the long period of convalescence in Switzerland where he recovered from epilepsy. When Rogozhin comments that an unhealthy, shabby-looking man hardly resembles a prince, Myshkin explains that, although he descended from an old noble family, he is penniless and has no family at all. He is returning to Petersburg in order to introduce himself to Madame Epanchin, a very distant relative who lives with her husband and three daughters. Before they part ways, Rogozhin mentions his love for a beautiful woman, Nastasya Fillipovna, and shows Myshkin a picture of her. Rogozhin is prepared to spend his inherited fortune and endure any amount of suffering in order to be with her, and he pursues her with a brooding, murderous passion. Myshkin, on the other hand, treats her—and indeed everyone he meets—with the same sweet and friendly simplicity, the same lack of pretense, and the same expectation of loving and being loved.

While *The Idiot* contains many digressions, secondary characters, and unresolved plotlines, the core of the story focuses on a love triangle between Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Nastasya. Myshkin is aware of Rogozhin's passion for Nastasya but, nevertheless, he is smitten after seeing her portrait hanging in the Epanchin household:

He was now even more struck by [Nastasya's] face, which was extraordinary from its beauty and from something else in it. There was a look of unbounded pride and contempt, along with hatred, in that face, and at the same time something confiding, something wonderfully simple-hearted. The contrast of these two elements roused a feeling almost of compassion. Her dazzling beauty was positively unbearable—the beauty of a pale face, almost sunken cheeks and glowing eyes—a strange beauty!” (Idiot 1.7, 73).

Nastasya's pride and contempt stems from her involvement with Totsky, a wealthy gentleman who brought her into his home when she was sixteen and made her his mistress. Now that Totsky wishes to find a wife, he must first marry off Nastasya to the

highest bidder. The proudly resentful Nastasya, considered by society a “fallen woman,” refuses to be bought and sold in such a debasing (if socially acceptable) manner. At the end of the first part of the novel, Myshkin declares his love for Nastasya and attempts to save her from the violent passion of Rogozhin.

As Part Two of the novel begins, the Myshkin-Nastasya relationship sinks into the background for lengthy stretches and is often replaced with Myshkin’s budding affections for Aglaia, the youngest of the Epanchin daughters. Like Nastasya, she admires Myshkin for his compassion and nonconformity, even as she takes pleasure in mocking his awkwardness. Although Myshkin is hopelessly gauche in social settings, both women entertain the prospects of marrying him. Paralyzed with fear and indecision, Myshkin is forced to choose between the two women, even though, in his ingenuous, loving way, he wishes to be with both of them.

As he makes his way through Petersburg society, Myshkin astounds everyone; no one knows what to make of him. Indeed, Myshkin has confounded, perturbed, and tantalized critics since the novel first appeared. Gentle and childlike, epileptic and sexually ambiguous, an “idiot” who is imposed upon by everyone, Myshkin is, in Elizabeth Dalton’s words, “a disturbingly contradictory mixture of incapacity and saintliness. He is like a core of unearthly light at the center of the novel; when his personality and motives are examined they seem to dissolve in indecipherable ambiguity, a kind of negative radiance that defies analysis” (61).

The prince’s “saintliness” has usually been linked to his Christ-like behavior, a notion that Dostoevsky supported in his notebooks when he referred to Myshkin as “Prince Christ” (55). While nothing so explicit appears in the novel, intimations of the New

Testament appear in Myshkin's story of Marie, a consumptive peasant girl who is ostracized by the Swiss villagers. Even the children taunt her. But Myshkin's compassion and his refusal to judge a fallen woman win over the children, who embrace Marie despite her poor health and tattered clothes. Myshkin's association with children in this story, and throughout the novel, evokes a further parallel of Christ—the Christ of “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” As the story suggests, Myshkin tends to look beneath the veneer of social convention and adult self-importance to the innocent, childlike core that he believes all people possess. He comments on the childlike qualities of Nastasya, Rogozin, and Aglaia; to Madame Epanchin he says “I feel positively certain that you are a perfect child in everything, everything, in good and bad alike, in spite of your age” (*Idiot* 1.6, 86). Myshkin's magnetic personality comforts many of those in Petersburg—one thinks especially of Nastasya, Aglaia Epanchin, and the consumptive teenager Ippolit—who suffer from the stifling greed and egoism of high society.

Myshkin has also been understood in the mystical tradition of the *iurodivyi*,⁴ or the holy fool, that has been especially prominent within Eastern Orthodoxy and Russia. The specialized Russian expression *iurodivye Khrista radi*, or *fools for Christ's sake*, comes from Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which he opposes earthly wisdom to the true wisdom that is found only in Christ: “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, then he may be wise. For the

⁴Sergei Ivanov notes that there is no satisfactory English equivalent for *iurodivyi* because “in modern Russian it is used too frequently (there are more than 85,000 occurrences of words with this root in the Russian internet) and has too many meanings” (vi). In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, eight characters are referred to as *iurodivye*, with each specific meaning varying with context: Constance Garnett translates *iurodivyi* as ‘idiot,’ ‘religious idiot,’ ‘pious ecstatic,’ ‘saintly fool,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘fanatic,’ ‘buffoonery,’ ‘foolery,’ or ‘crazy streak.’ (Ivanov vi). For the most comprehensive treatment of holy foolishness in Dostoevsky's fiction, see Murav.

wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Cor. 3); and also, “we are fools for Christ’s sake; we are weak but ye are strong; ye are honorable, but we are despised” (1 Cor. 4:10). Paul ironically compares the seeming comfort of the Corinthians with the persecuted life of the apostles to show that, in fact, the apostles possess true wisdom in spite of their status as “fools.”

The Pauline meaning of “fool”—as someone who is foolish in this world but holy in God’s eyes—became the biblical basis for the tradition of holy foolishness in Russia. Perhaps the most famous visual symbol of Russia, the Cathedral of Saint Vasili in Moscow, was built in tribute to Saint Basil, a holy fool from the sixteenth century (Heller and Volkova 153). Saint Basil and other holy fools paraded around their villages in rags (or completely naked) and engaged in aggressive, reckless behavior that astounded the townspeople. But their outrageous actions were meant to be taken as a lesson. As Elena Volkova puts it, “The fool’s naked, dirty, ugly, strange and indecent appearance was a metaphor for humankind’s soiled, ‘naked,’ sinful soul that has lost its ‘wedding garments,’ its innocence...The holy fools look the way human being really look in a spiritual sense” (Heller and Volkova 155). Through their downtrodden appearance and feigned madness, holy fools stood as spiritual symbols who were repellent on the surface but also, paradoxically, tragic and strangely appealing from a spiritual point of view. Those in society who recognized the symbolic aspect of holy foolishness were deeply touched and edified; those who did not mocked and abused the holy fool, but, in doing so, unwittingly demonstrated that profane minds were unable to grasp divine truth.

Nineteenth-century Russian literature inherited the hagiographical tradition of depicting the lives of saints, holy fools, and ideal persons. Dostoevsky’s fiction is filled

an diverse assortment of holy fools: Sonia Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*; Semen Yakovlevich and Maria Timofeevna in *The Devils*; Father Ferapont, Alyosha Karamazov, and Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*; and, of course, Myshkin, who stands as Dostoevsky's supreme attempt to represent "a perfectly beautiful man." It should be noted that most of Dostoevsky's characters, Myshkin included, do not *physically* resemble the extravagant figures from the sixteenth century. As "stylized holy fools," Ewa Thompson explains that Dostoevsky's characters "practice the behavioral constraints of holy foolishness without actually donning the rags of *iurodivye* or adopting their ways of communicating with people. These stylized holy fools express Dostoevskii's hope that the myth [of holy foolishness] can be fleshed out by the imagination, and then it can enter Russian life and remain there for good" (149). Dostoevsky's characters thus embody the tensions inherent in holy foolishness, including wisdom and foolishness, purity and impurity, tradition and rootlessness, meekness and aggression, and respect and derision (Thompson 16).

As a meek, unprepossessing figure who arrives mysteriously from abroad, Myshkin is immediately cast in the role of a holy fool. In the very first scene on the train, when Rogozhin learns that Myshkin has no sexual knowledge of women, he remarks, "Well, if that is the case, then you are a complete *iurodivyi* and God loves those such as you" (*Idiot* 1.1, 3). Myshkin arrives as an exiled "idiot" who comes from nowhere and has nowhere to go. Just as Rogozhin labels him a *iurodivyi*, so too do others assign him contradictory roles, so that Myshkin is alternatively holy, blessed, salvific, sickly, mad.

While Dostoevsky casts Myshkin in the role of both a mortal Christ and a holy fool, his saintliness is also linked with his disease, epilepsy. Like Rogozhin, most Russians

retained a tolerance, even a reverence, for the afflicted. This conception of madness was at odds with Western histories of madness, which considered epilepsy to be a shameful form of illness. The ancient Greeks, for instance, believed that the “sacred disease” resulted from demon possession or, alternatively, that it was a contagious affliction caused by fright, sorrow, or masturbation (Kiple 716-717).⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century—just before the *The Idiot* was written—epilepsy began to receive a specifically medical definition as a disease of the brain that could be identified, treated, and ultimately cordoned off from healthy, “normal” modes of experience. “With the rise of medical psychology in the late nineteenth century,” explains Murav, “what might have been previously understood to be an ascetic practice, or a sign of a charismatic ability, could now be diagnosed as a symptom of disease. The *foolishness* of the holy fool could be interpreted as abnormality” (5).

Myshkin himself vacillates between interpreting his disease as a religious experience or an abnormal disease. Before the “sadness, spiritual darkness and oppression” that accompanies an epileptic attack, Myshkin enjoys a few seconds of inexpressible ecstasy during which “his mind and his heart were flooded with extraordinary light; all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties were relieved at once; they were all merged in a lofty calm full of serene, harmonious joy and hope” (*Idiot* 2.4, 207-8). Myshkin later says that he would be willing to give his whole life for that moment.⁶ The sense of

⁵ For a discussion of madness in the specific context of Russian culture (including Dostoevsky), see Brintlinger; an interesting cross-cultural discussion of madness and holy foolishness, or “divine idiocy,” appears in Heller and Volkova.

⁶ Myshkin’s account is virtually the same as Dostoevsky’s description of his own epileptic attacks, which his friend Strakhov recounts: “‘For several brief moments,’ he would say, ‘I feel a happiness unthinkable in a normal state and impossible to imagine by anyone else who has not lived through it. I am then in complete harmony with myself and with the whole universe; and the sensation is so powerful and so delightful that for a few seconds of such happiness one would give ten years of life, perhaps one’s whole

alienation overcome, the sense of unity, and the felt rather than merely intellectual quality of the experience all suggest a mystical divine experience. But Myshkin goes on to offer a medical explanation for the disease that, in effect, demystifies his religious experience:

Thinking about the [epileptic] moment afterward...he often told himself that all these gleams and flashes of superior self-awareness and, hence, of a "higher state of being" were nothing other than sickness...and yet he came finally to an extremely paradoxical conclusion..."what does it matter if it is abnormal intensity, if the result...turns out to be the height of harmony and beauty...of reconciliation, an ecstatic and prayerlike union in the highest synthesis of life?"
(*Idiot* 2.4, 207-8)

Here, Myshkin undermines his own religious language with the language of science and skepticism that Russia inherited from Western conceptions of disease. Thus Myshkin's efforts to understand his pre-epileptic sensations take the form of a unresolved contest between religious and medical explanations.

The widespread confusion about the nature of Myshkin's epilepsy casts further doubts about his problematic sanctity. Is Myshkin a modern-day savior who can redeem those around him? Or is his "holiness" merely an illusion, a smokescreen caused by his debilitating disease? As the novel draws to a close, the fear that Myshkin's saintly behavior is ineffectual and that it propels other to destruction, rather than salvation, enters the minds of many characters in the novel, the narrator (who grows hostile towards Myshkin), and also many critical readers of *The Idiot*.⁷ The prince is torn between his love for Aglaia and for Nastasya; he does not know what to do. As he tells Radomsky:

"I love [Nastasya] with my whole heart! Why, she's...a child! Now she's a child, quite a child! You, you know nothing about it!"

life'" (Frank, *Ordeal* 196). For a comprehensive discussion of Dostoevsky's medical history, see Rice's *The Healing Art*.

⁷ Caryl Emerson argues that Myshkin "monologizes" the other characters and drives them to destruction ("Baxtin"). Krieger argues that Myshkin, "though his Christian humility with Nastasya, Rogozhin, and Ippolit...has refused to give his beloved humanity the privilege of sinning...his irrational Christlike transcendence of mere ethical judgment turns deadly" (222).

“And at the same time you have declared your love to Aglaia Ivanovna?”

“Oh, yes, yes!”

“How so? Then you want to love both of them?”

“Oh, yes, yes!”

Upon my word, prince, think what you’re saying!” (*Idiot* 4.9, 535).

Radomsky cannot suppress his derision: “Ha-ha! And how can one love two at once? With two different sorts of love? That’s interesting...poor idiot! What will become of him now?” (*Idiot* 4.9, 535). The tension between these two loves strains to its breaking point: Nastasya misunderstands Myshkin’s selfless, compassionate love and elopes with Rogozhin, who murders her. In the final scene, the two men lay side by side near the dead body of Nastasya, their faces pressed together so closely that Myshkin’s tears run down Rogozhin’s cheeks. The novel ends where it began, with Myshkin lapsed in a permanent epileptic state.

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Why would McCullers be drawn to such an odd figure? Many readers understand Myshkin as a highly ambiguous character in whom others place a hope of salvation and who, at the same time, is ridiculed for his naive, gauche behavior. McCullers points out precisely this tension between heterogeneous elements in her comparison of Russian realism and modern Southern fiction. While she uses *Crime and Punishment* and *As I Lay Dying* as examples, Myshkin also represents a similar “juxtaposition” or conflation of that which is idiotic and wise, salvific and destructive, feminine and masculine, youthful and mature, even dead and alive. (Myshkin is still breathing in the final scene, but he has reverted to a stupefaction that can hardly be considered “life”). He is, in other words, an

embodiment of the grotesque, a walking paradox whom McCullers saw as indicative of the peculiar realism that Dostoevsky shared with modern Southern writers and which she herself employed.

As mentioned in chapter one, McCullers's early interpreters tended to view her characters in terms of spiritual alienation, a notion that she herself supported. In Louis D. Rubin Jr.'s opinion, suffering becomes the objective of McCullers's fiction in which her lovelorn characters, yearning for a better life outside the South, are filled with "painful angst" (140). But a number of feminist-minded critics have reminded us that the grotesque is not exclusively symbolic of existential angst and the alienating human condition. Sarah Gleeson-White, for instance, has argued that McCullers's freakish fictional world "intimately engage[s] issues of subjectivity in the material realms of gender and sexuality" (*Strange* 3), thereby inviting an affirmative vision of the grotesque that celebrates the shifting contours of the human body. Gleeson-White's study stands alongside other feminist approaches—most notably Rachel Adams's and Patricia Yaeger's—that re-read McCullers's fiction in the light of corporeality, affirmation, and transgressive forms of gender and sexuality.⁸

Gleeson-White, for instance, rightly notes that the previous generation of critics neglected a consideration of gender and sexuality in favor of universal themes of alienation. Yet her own study, while filled with valuable and innovative readings of McCullers's "strange bodies," barely mentions the possible intersection between the corporeal and the spiritual. I am not insisting that we should or should not choose between the material and the metaphysical dimensions of the grotesque. I want to suggest, rather, that we *cannot* choose between them because they are inseparable. As

⁸ For a detailed overview of feminist readings of McCullers's fiction, see Free.

Bakhtin notes, the imbrication of the material and the immaterial is an essential principle of grotesque realism, which he defines as “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (*Rabelais* 19-20). McCullers’s attraction to Dostoevsky, in my opinion, was precisely because of the way in which the grotesque bodies in his fiction are both more “real” in their materiality and highly suggestive in their symbolism. As I will try to show, this tension is most distinct in the Myshkin-Rogozhin and Singer-Antonapoulos relationships, in which Christ-like compassion is easily confused with homoerotic desire.

III. Sickly Saints

Oliver Evans perceptively observed that “There is in Singer more than a slight resemblance to Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* of Dostoevsky: about both characters there is an aura of holiness which is associated with their simplicity, and both inspire confidences from the most unlikely persons” (66). Evans rightly points out the remarkable affinity between Myshkin and Singer, although it is not only “simplicity” that one associates with their holiness but also their handicaps, epilepsy and deafness. Just as Myshkin’s infirmity is both debilitating and the source of mystical perception, so too is it worth examining the way in which Singer’s incapacity blends with his saintliness.

As Jan Whitt and others have noticed, Singer resembles Christ in appearance and behavior (“Loneliest” 26). He has in his face “something gentle and Jewish, the knowledge of one who belongs to a race that is oppressed....a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise” (*Heart* 260). When he visits Dr. Copeland at the hospital, the encounter is reminiscent of both Christ’s involvement with children in Palestine and Myshkin’s fondness for children in the Swiss village: “[Copeland] treated a syphilitic child and pointed out to Mr. Singer the scaling eruption on the palms of the hand, the dull, opaque surface of the eye, the sloping upper front incisors....Mr. Singer walked behind him and watched and understood. He gave nickels to the children” (*Heart* 114-15).

Singer’s sensitivity and compassion attracts an eclectic group of people—a black doctor, a teenage girl, a cafe owner, and a quixotic reformer—who desperately wish to open their hearts and minds to someone who will understand them. For all of them this search occurs in an implicit religious context. When, for example, Biff Brannon’s wife is preparing her Sunday school lesson, she reads from the Gospel story in which Simon and Andrew follow Christ: “and in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed. And Simon and they that were with Him followed after Him. And when they had found Him, they said unto Him, ‘All men seek for Thee’” (*Heart* 35). The passage from the Gospels describes, by analogy, how Copeland, Mick, Biff, and Blount seek out Singer.

The great irony of the novel, of course, is that everyone sees Singer not for what he is—a deaf, lonely man who cares only about being with the man that he loves—but as the savior that they need him to be and which he does not want to be. Singer’s incapacity

stems from a literal heartsickness: without “My Only Friend,” as he addresses his letter to Antonapoulos, he grows miserable (*Heart* 213). Singer remains preoccupied with his friend’s absence and dreams about him incessantly: “Nothing seemed real except the ten years with Antonapoulos. In his half-dreams he saw his friend very vividly, and when he awakened a great aching loneliness would be in him” (*Heart* 11). To some degree this loneliness is magnified by Singer’s surroundings. With his friend confined in a hospital and with no family of his own, Singer is a boarder who, like Myshkin, rents a room from a nuclear family (Singer stays with the Kellys while Myshkin stays with Ganya, an employee of the Epanchins). The proximity to others only magnifies Singer’s isolation. “It was funny,” Mick Kelly thinks, “how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house” (*Heart* 155). Indeed, the restricted locale of McCullers’s novels, in which characters remain permanently in one room, one house, or a small provincial town, bears a resemblance to the dark corners and underground apartments in which Dostoevsky houses many of his protagonists. “Like Dostoevsky,” writes Temira Pachmuss, McCullers “uses the grotesque not for amusement, but to create an atmosphere of loneliness and isolation that is associated with mental (and often physical) deformity” (116).

Even more importantly, both McCullers and Dostoevsky convey isolation through grotesque bodies that speak more—or differently—than words. Silence becomes a conscious act of “speaking” through grotesque images of fiddling hands, powerful glances, and the involuntary spasms of the body after an epileptic fit. In *The Idiot* silence functions as a vital rhetorical device that hinges on evasions, stammering, and sudden

interruptions.⁹ Myshkin's most violent seizure coincides with his frenzied attempt to explain himself in the famous vase-breaking scene: "This wild tirade, this rush of strange and agitated words and confused, enthusiastic ideas, which seemed tripping each other up and tumbling over one another in confusion, all seemed suggestive of something ominous in [Myshkin's] mental condition" (*Idiot* 4.7, 501). Myshkin is most successful at communicating when he uses figurative language, especially parables; he is *least* successful when he tries to express himself literally through an outpouring of words.

The struggle to communicate in *The Idiot* is part of Dostoevsky's overall strategy of silence and negation. Caryl Emerson has noted that, in spite of his reputation as a master of dialogue, Dostoevsky "was far more attuned to the healing effects of *nonverbal* communication—silence, icons, genuflections, visual images—than he was to the alleged beneficent effect of words" (*The First Hundred Years* 147).¹⁰ This practice reflects his immersion within an Eastern Orthodox tradition that stresses an apophatic or "negative" path to knowledge.¹¹ Transcending any attempt to capture his essence in human language, God retains the last word—and remains silent. Dostoevsky repeatedly suggests that experience, especially religious experience, cannot be captured by definitive statements.

⁹ In her classic study of the novel, Robin Miller contends that its principal theme is "that words cannot fully express a thought" (*Idiot* 2); see also Skakov 121-140. The challenge of expressing an idea also appeared in Dostoevsky's attempt (and failure, in his opinion) to say what he wanted in the novel. In a letter to his niece he wrote, "I'm terribly worried about the novel, and there are moments when I feel almost certain it won't come off well. The idea is too beautiful and perhaps I won't be able to do justice to it" (*Letters* 288).

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the division in Dostoevsky scholarship between an attention to words versus images, see Emerson's "Word and Image."

¹¹ *Apophysis*, or negative theology, refers to discourse that "denies that the transcendent can be named or given attributes" (Sells 2). The word itself implies "un-saying" or "speaking-away" and is opposed to *kataphasis*, which denotes "affirmation, saying, speaking-with" (2). In short, any attempt to speak the truth diminishes it. While Dostoevsky's apophaticism has been amply explored, no doubt because of his Eastern Orthodox background, McCullers's fiction has rarely been examined from this perspective.

The challenge to communicate extends, of course, to many characters in *Heart*, including the carnival worker Jake Blount. Once a fundamentalist Christian, now a zealous Marxist, Blount has read widely in the hopes of discovering “the truth.” More often than not, however, he is inarticulate. After reading convoluted theories that are couched in grandiose language—“dialectical materialism,” “Jesuitical prevarication,” “teleological propensity,”—Blount expounds them in a bizarre, incomprehensible manner (*Heart* 68). “Most of the time,” Biff Brannon observes, “nobody was sure just what he was saying. Talk-talk-talk. The words came out of his throat like a cataract. And the thing was that the accent he used was always changing, the kinds of words he used” (*Heart* 17). Blount’s impassioned outbursts, like Myshkin’s “tirade,” break down in favor of silence.

Blount’s words, which pour indiscriminately from his mouth, also manifest themselves in his spasmodic mannerisms. Unlike Singer, whose resistance is passive (he avoids confrontation and commits suicide), Blount is an aggressive figure whose features take on an exaggerated, distorted form. Biff Brannon notices that “there were many things about the fellow that seemed contrary. His head was very large and well-shaped, but his neck was soft and slender as a boy’s. The mustache looked false, as if it had been stuck on for a costume party and would fall off if he talked too fast. It made him seem almost middle aged, although his face with its high, smooth forehead and wide-open eyes was young” (*Heart* 51). Though Blount is short, his hands are large and ugly, and he further mangles them out of frustration and religious fervor. In a passage that is reminiscent of O’Connor’s first novel, Jake tells Singer about his early need for Jesus:

My first belief was Jesus. There was this fellow working in the same shed with me. He had a tabernacle and preached every night. I went and listened and I got this faith. My mind was on Jesus all day long. In my spare time I studied the Bible and prayed. Then one night I took a hammer and laid my hand on the table. I was angry and I

drove the nail all the way through. My hand was nailed to the table, and I looked at it and the fingers fluttered and turned blue. (Heart 128)

Is this not the same kind of grotesque portrait that one finds in *Wise Blood*? To some degree it is, and it points to the same type of “negative” grotesquerie that Haze Motes exemplifies. But unlike Motes, Blount is only a counterpoint to the story, not its central figure. Blount’s and the others’ struggle to make sense finds clearest expression in the figure of the mute, whom McCullers called “a symbol of infirmity” (“Notes” 200).

Singer’s mode of communication, sign language, is conspicuously non-verbal; we learn to “read” his hands for information. When he lived with Antonapoulos in town, Singer’s hands “shaped the words in a swift series of designs. His face was eager and his gray-green eyes sparkled brightly. With his thin, strong hands he told Antonapoulos all that had happened during the day” (Heart 4). His gestures are mostly rapid and purposeful, as he reaches out soundlessly through his actions and gestures. After Antonapoulos is committed to the state asylum, however, Singer leaves the room “with his hands stuffed hard into his pockets” (Heart 94). Later, when a group of mutes come up to him at a bar and ask him about Antonapoulos, who recently died, “Singer stood with his hands dangling loose” (325). As Frances Freeman Paden observed in her study of the novel as a series of autistic gestures, “the hand, which looms so large in the novel, works as an instrument of the heart....[the characters’] hands reveal the alienation that they feel in their unsuccessful quests for love and acceptance” (454). Singer’s handicap mirrors in physical fact the inability of the others to render or receive the kind of love and understanding that they so desperately need.

The characters ceaselessly seek out Singer, visiting him in his apartment and at the café because they “know” that Singer understands them. But Singer does not

understand them, nor does he pretend to. The townspeople, believing Singer to be omniscient, divinize him. While Blount is the only figure who speaks of his need in terms of Christ, Benedict, Copeland, and Mick all cast Singer in the role of savior. When Mick images God's appearance, for instance, "she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent—maybe that was why she was reminded" (*Heart* 119-20). Many characters in *The Idiot* are all similarly drawn to Myshkin's salvific potential. Nastasya, Aglaia, and Rogozhin all, in different ways, deconstruct and reconstruct the prince in the image of their ideals: Aglaia teases Myshkin that he is the "Poor Knight" from a Pushkin poem who will come to her rescue; for Nastasya, Myshkin is her salvation from the cruel, economic, paternalist system in which she has been trapped since a young age.¹² Just as the characters endow John Singer with attributes of a Savior, so too does Myshkin stand as an imitative model for the others.

Oliver Evans further observes that "In neither novel is the attempt to make a Christ figure of the protagonist entirely successful, and both books suffer from a certain fuzziness in their symbolism" (60). In my opinion, this "fuzziness" can be accounted for by considering the specific figure of Christ with which Myshkin and Singer are associated. The image of Christ that continuously emerges in *The Idiot* is not the Savior of Orthodoxy, fully God and fully man, but a humanized, mortal Christ who, in the words of Ernest Renan, "never dreamt of making himself pass for an incarnation of God" (181). The image of a mortal Christ first appears when Myshkin sees a portrait of Hans

¹²When Totsky puts Nastasya on the "market," open to the highest bidder, the "sale" of Nastasya is the parodic equivalent of the dowry that General Epanchin must pay in order to marry off his three daughters. In this respect, marriage is best understood in Sedgwick's sense as "the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (*Between Men* 25-6). When he arrives at Nastasya's outrageous birthday gathering, Myshkin tries to "rescue" her from the crass display of buying and selling that takes place among her suitors.

Holbein's "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" hanging in Rogozhin's house.

Ippolit describes the gruesome picture:

In the picture the face is fearfully crushed by blows, swollen, covered with fearful, swollen and blood-stained bruises, the eyes are open and squinting: the great wide-open whites of the eyes glitter with a sort of deathly, glass light. But, strange to say, as one looks at this corpse of a tortured man, a peculiar and curious question arises; if just such a corpse (and it must have been just like that) was seen by all His disciples, by those who were to become His chief apostles, by the women that followed Him and stood by the cross, by all who believed in Him and worshipped Him, how could they believe that that martyr would rise again?

(*Idiot* 3.6, 374).



—Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521)

Holbein's Christ looks dead and battered, doomed to permanent death; and Myshkin, visibly shaken by the painting, comments that "from this picture someone may even lose his faith" (*Idiot* 3.6, 375). Given Myshkin's association with *this* type of Christ, it is not difficult to see how his salvific potential is placed in serious question. Jan Whitt similarly notes that McCullers, "haunted by a Christ that remained entombed," became obsessed with making Singer into a "paralyzed Christ figure" ("Loneliest" 26). I will return to this point shortly, but first I want to discuss the way in which McCullers's and Dostoevsky's tropes of silence also extend to the unspoken desire that appears in the Myshkin-Rogozhin and Singer-Antonapoulos pairings.

IV. Silent Lovers

For Myshkin and Rogozhin, the erotic value that both men attach to Nastasya becomes perceptible in their friendship with each other: after showing Myshkin her picture, Rogozhin suddenly comments, "I'm sure I don't know why I have taken a liking to you....Come and see me, Prince" (*Idiot* 1.1,13). Myshkin replies, "I will come with the greatest of pleasure and thank you very much for liking me. I may come today even, if I've time. For I tell you frankly I've taken a great liking to you myself" (*Idiot* 1.1, 14). Even in the midst of their rivalry, the two men experience moments of great affection; at

one point they exchange crosses and enter a sworn brotherhood.¹³ When Rogozhin finally kills Nastasya, the rivalry between the two men disappears and they reunite in a relationship that has distinct homoerotic overtones. After Myshkin's painful realization of what happened, Rogozhin invites him to spend the night together in a vigil over her body; he even insists on making up a bed so the two men can sleep side-by-side. After Myshkin assents, Rogozhin leads him "tenderly and eagerly" into bed (*Idiot* 4.11, 559).

In this final, distressing scene, Dostoevsky lays special emphasis on non-verbal forms of communication. Just before the actual revelation of Nastasya's death, a mysterious silence suffuses the room: "Neither of them uttered a word all the while they stood by the bedside. Myshkin's heart beat so violently that it seemed as though it were audible in the death-like stillness of the room" (*Idiot* 4.11, 503). This absolute silence is broken by the faint, unrelenting sound of a buzzing fly that "flew over the bed and settled on the pillow" (*Idiot* 4.11, 503). As the reality of Nastasya's death sinks in, both men are unable to speak. When Rogozhin is tormented by fitful dreams during the night, causing him to laugh and "mutter incoherently," Myshkin responds by gently stroking Rogozhin's hair and cheeks:

Myshkin jumped up from the chair in new terror. When Rogozhin was quiet (and he suddenly ceased), Myshkin bent softly over him, sat beside him and with his heart beating violently and his breath coming in gasps, he began looking at him. Rogozhin did not turn his head towards him and seemed indeed to have forgotten him. Myshkin looked and waited; time was passing, it began to get light. From time to time Rogozhin began shouting and laughing. Then Myshkin stretched out his trembling hand to him and softly touched his head, his hair, stroking them and stroking his cheeks...he could do nothing else! He began trembling again, and again his legs seemed suddenly to fail him. Quite a new sensation gnawed at his heart with infinite anguish. Meanwhile it had become quite light; at last he lay down on the pillow as though utterly helpless and despairing and put his face

¹³The pledging of brotherhood that occurs is a version of *adelphopoiesis* or "brother-making," once a rite celebrated in the church throughout the Orthodox world, but gradually forbidden. Børtnes suggests that "there is a strong homoerotic potential in *adelphopoiesis* exploited by Dostoevsky in the novel" (113).

close to the pale and motionless face of Rogozhin; tears flowed from his eyes on to Rogozhin's cheeks, but perhaps he did not notice then his own tears and was quite unaware of them. (*Idiot* 4.11, 561)

An unspeakable desire between the two men, coupled with their lament over Nastasya's dead body, disrupts their faculty of speech: Rogozhin is possessed by brain fever (from which he eventually recovers) and Myshkin reverts back to idiocy, consigned to *permanent* silence.

Myshkin's collapse is often understood as a Christ-like unconditional sacrifice of the self—in theological parlance, his kenosis—in the service of a man whose jealous, murderous love has consumed him. In this respect Myshkin's love for Rogozhin is identical to the tenderness that he shows for the peasant girl Marie, the consumptive teenager Ippolit, and indeed most of the others in the novel. At the same time, many commentators agree that the final scene contains a homoerotic subtext that hinges on the triangular relationship between Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Nastasya.¹⁴ Rene Girard and Eve Sedgwick have both considered the dynamics of gender asymmetry in erotic triangles. In *Between Men* Sedgwick revises Girard in order to focus on "homosocial desire," which includes various forms of "male bonding" (2). She argues that normative, heterosexual relations between men are structured by triangulating practices in which the most important connection is not between man and women, but between the two men who have no other way of expressing intimacies with one another. From this perspective, Myshkin and Rogozhin cling to each other in the bed not because they have lost their chance to sleep with Nastasya, but because their attraction to each other must be re-

¹⁴ "It is clear," writes Michael Katz, "that the author is portraying sympathetically the existence of a strong homophilic and/or homoerotic bond between these two male characters" (245). See also Børtnes 118-120.

channeled in the absence of the mediator. We are left with the striking, ambiguous image of two men laying in each other's arms, mere feet away from a murdered woman.

As an author who specialized in creating “freaks” and who believed that she was bisexual herself, McCullers surely related to Myshkin's sexual uncertainty. As mentioned earlier, McCullers's tumultuous relationships with Reeves, Diamond, and Annemarie resembles (in multiple ways) the Myshkin-Rogozhin-Nastasya love triangle. The two male characters in *The Idiot* personify two extreme forms of love that, as she wrote to Diamond, McCullers felt “a cross between”—Myshkin's selfless, compassionate, ultimately unrealizable love on the one hand and Rogozhin's violent, passionate, destructive love on the other. That McCullers identified as a weird amalgam of both men is further evidence of an unwillingness, throughout her life, to label herself as straight, lesbian, or bisexual. (Whitt, “Lesbian” 103). Just as Nastasya ultimately spurns Myshkin's advances, so too did Annemarie reject McCullers, whose ambivalent nature, in Carr's words, “demanded, craved, a reciprocal love relationship with a woman” (167). Perhaps Myshkin confirmed McCullers's suspicions about the fundamental openness of erotic relationships and the impossibility of finding permanent comfort in a single person—a theme to which she would devote considerable attention throughout her fiction.

I also mention Sedgwick's analysis of triangular desire not only because the structuring relationships in *The Idiot* and McCullers's fiction (not to mention her own life) are often triangular, but also because she stresses the *unspoken* nature of desire. McCullers's volatile relationships with women, and her claim that she should have been “born a man,” suggests that she never came to terms with her lesbianism or bisexuality

(Carr 15; 159; 168). Much of her fiction, consequently, engages with questions of same-sex desire without addressing them directly. Gleeson-White elaborates upon the “coded” nature of homosexuality in McCullers’s fiction: “No doubt due to the sexual prescription of compulsory heterosexuality and the proscription of homosexual relationships at the time she wrote, McCullers’s fictional treatment of such relationships is coded or implied through significant ellipses. It is what is *not* said that the reader must attend to in order to uncover inverted desire” (*Strange* 123). In this context McCullers’s attraction to and identification with Myshkin becomes crucial to understanding, first, how conflicted and silent she was about her own sexuality; and, second, her fictional worlds in which characters grapple with jealousy, mixed messages, and ambivalent feelings.

In this respect *Heart* stands as the gateway to the rest of her fiction in which confused sexual and gender configurations permeate and indeed overwhelm her texts. Her second novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, for instance, contains similar themes of silence, voyeurism, and unspoken desire. Set on a military base in Georgia, the action focuses on the triangular relationship between the impotent Captain Penderton (played by an aging Marlon Brando in the 1967 film), his amorous and unfaithful wife, Leonora, and Private Ellgee Williams, a young soldier to whom Penderton develops a powerful attraction. In a similar fashion to Singer’s desire for Antonapoulos, as I will discuss shortly, McCullers depicts same-sex attraction as a physical affliction: Penderton’s “preoccupation with the soldier grew in him like a disease,” like cancer cells that “rebel and begin the insidious self-multiplications that will ultimately destroy the body” (*Reflections* 109-10). In a number of unsettling scenes, Williams stands outside the Pendertons’ house and silently stares at the domestic turmoil therein, eventually sneaking

inside to watch Leonora while she sleeps. Penderton ends up killing Williams when he finds the young soldier standing at his wife's bedside.

In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* we learn, though grotesque exaggeration, that any person or thing can be the object of love; that the value of love derives solely from the lover; and that the state of being beloved is an intolerable condition that inevitably produces fear and hatred of the lover. "The curt truth," says the narrator, "is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being beloved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain" (*Stories* 216). These statements are demonstrated in three identical, unreciprocated loves: Miss Amelia's love for the hunchback dwarf Cousin Lymon; Lymon's love for the cruel, hyper-manly Marvin Macy; and Macy's slavish love for Miss Amelia. The grotesque and repulsive characteristics of each figure demonstrates that, for each lover, what he or she finds is not what is "really" there, but what each lover wishes to see.

Miss Amelia, for instance, is consistently described in ambiguous terms: "Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed" (*Stories* 198). The narrator also point out that Amelia's physical oddness is accentuated when she tries to conform to physical norms; she looks strange in a dress, which "hung on her in a most peculiar fashion" (*Stories* 198). The visible gender contradictions are further underscored by what remains

invisible— that is, whether Miss Amelia is anatomically different from her fellow females:

She did not warm her backside modestly, lifting her skirt only an inch or so, as do most women in public. There was not a grain of modesty about Miss Amelia, and she frequently seemed to forget altogether that there were men in the room. Now as she stood warming herself, the red dress was pulled up quite high in the back so that a piece of her strong hairy thigh could be seen by anyone who cared to look at it. (Stories 243)

The visual amalgam of masculine and feminine traits—the hairy thigh, the lack of modesty, the red dress—leads the reader to wonder if this figure is a woman or a man. More accurately, Amelia seems to be *both* a woman and a man. Here and throughout McCullers's fiction, gender appears as fluid and mutable, multiple and transgressive. The love triangle in *Ballad* also demonstrates that McCullers's fictional worlds are worlds "between men," as Sedgwick defines it: the woman functions as an intermediary so that men might be with each other. Although Macy and Lymon are not exactly rivals for Miss Amelia's affections, they nevertheless use her in order to gain access to each other—Lymon for love, Marvin to avenge Miss Amelia through jealousy. The end of the story, when Lymon and Marvin poison Amelia's food, destroy her room, and leave town together, is jarring in its cruelty. Margaret McDowell notes that *Ballad* "explores such themes as sexual ambivalence, destructive infatuation, the pain of being rejected by the beloved, the problematical configurations implied in any love triangle, and the paradoxical closeness of love and hate" (32).

Without straying too far from the topic at hand, I mention *Reflections* and *Ballad* to stress that the themes of gender confusion, sexuality, and violence span McCullers's entire *oeuvre* and were especially prominent during the summers of 1940-41 when she

met Annemarie and David Diamond and seized upon the violent triangular relationship in *The Idiot*.¹⁵ Another powerful form of silent desire culminating in violence—suicide—appears in the relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos. Their mutual affection, like the pair in *The Idiot*, is not treated overtly but through suggestive imagery and non-verbal signals, especially Singer’s knowing glances and his nervous hands. The couple’s relationship is filled with tenderness and compassion, often on Singer’s part. Each night, after walking together in town, Singer “nearly always put his hand on his friend’s arm and looked for a second into his face before leaving him” (*Heart* 3). During the ten years that they spend living together, Singer centers his whole existence on his friend, working to support them and nursing the Greek’s gradually failing health.¹⁶ When Antonapoulos leaves, troubling dreams dominate Singer’s thoughts and his hands take on a life of their own: “his hands were a torment to him. They would not rest. They twitched in his sleep, and sometimes he awoke to find them shaping the words in his dreams before his face” (*Heart* 182). Throughout the novel the frenzied activity of Singer’s hands is the source of embarrassment. Like Wing Biddlebaum and Homer Simpson, those tormented protagonists of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Singer’s desire finds embodied expression in his restless hands.

The confusion of religious and sexual imagery culminates with Singer’s “pyramid dream”:

¹⁵*Reflections in A Golden Eye* was dedicated to Annemarie in 1940 while *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was dedicated to Diamond in 1941—the same year when McCullers compared herself to “a cross between” Myshkin and Rogozhin. She also wrote her essay on the Russian realists in the summer of 1941. It seems that McCullers turned to Dostoevsky—and to *The Idiot* in particular—during an especially trying emotional period in her life.

¹⁶As an example of McCullers’s use of coded language, Gary Richards points out that “Antonapoulos is significantly Greek, a national and/or ethnic identity frequently linked to same-sex acts—and anal sex in particular—because of the region’s accepted pederastic relationships during antiquity” (163)

Out of the blackness of sleep a dream formed. There were dull yellow lanterns lighting up a dark flight of stone steps. Antonapoulos kneeled at the top of these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at it as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps. He was naked and cold and he could not take his eyes from Antonapoulos and the thing he held above him. Behind him on the ground he felt the one with the mustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind him there were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. His own hands were huge windmills and he stared fascinated at the unknown thing that Antonapoulos held. The yellow lanterns swayed to and fro in the darkness and all else was motionless. Then suddenly there was a ferment. In the upheaval the steps collapsed and he felt himself falling downward. He awoke with a jerk. The early light whitened the window. He felt afraid. (Heart 217)

A number of details—yellow lanterns, stone steps, prostrate masses of people in the background—suggest that he gazes up at a religious image, perhaps a cross. This reading is consistent with the notion that the characters divinize others in order to create gods of their own making: just as Antonapoulos kneels before the cross, so too does Singer bow to the Greek and the others before Singer. An additional detail, particularly interesting given the context in which Dostoevsky lived and wrote, is the Orthodox coloring of the dream. Antonapoulos's Greek nationality, which invites an association with Orthodoxy, accompanies an unspoken adoration for the image that he looks at "as though in prayer" (Heart 213). The reverent silence that suffuses the room is consistent with the Orthodox emphasis on forms of unspoken worship, especially icons. Indeed, the dream itself resembles an iconographic image.

As many commentators have noted, Singer's dream provides a powerful image of the novel's thematic as a whole. Mick, Biff, Copeland, and Blount cannot take their eyes off Singer. Singer, in turn, is fixated on his own god-surrogate, Antonapoulos, who seems to be unconcerned with anything beyond physical pleasure. The fact that Singer's four friends do not see him as he really is but as they imagine him, and that Singer does not

see Antonapoulos as he really is but as *he* imagines *him*, suggests that (like the trio in *Ballad*) what lovers see in others whom they admire or love is not what is “really” there but what they wish to find. The more grotesque and repulsive the character, the more forcefully he or she illustrates this basic truth of McCullers’s fiction. The unseen object above the Greek’s head is invisible in part because it is a construction, an interchangeable object that is determined by the viewer.

In spite of the pervasive religious symbolism in the dream, others have suggested that the “unknown thing” that Antonapoulos holds in his hands is a phallic image (Gleeson-White, *Strange* 125-30; Budick 145-50). Early in the novel, after all, the Greek’s hand are associated not only with eating, his favorite pastime, but also with his “secret solitary pleasure,” masturbation. Throughout the novel Antonapoulos is constantly eating; he seems unconcerned with anything beyond physical pleasure. Singer, as result, grows so anxious from what he sees that he wakes in fear “with a jerk” (*Heart* 5; 213). By representing Singer’s hands as nervous, fidgety, and possessed with a life of their own, Emily Budick comments that “Singer might well feel afraid of what he has witnessed in his dream of raw and naked desire. He may have very good reasons for refusing to say what thing he has seen” (148).

Like the ending of *The Idiot*, which confuses spiritual and sexual love, the pyramid dream represents an instance in which religious and phallic symbols are easily substituted or even conflated. Is the “unknown thing” a cross or a penis? Does Singer’s dream stand for divine, Platonic love or is it an elevation of Eros? There are no clear answers to these questions. At the end of the day, each reading is optional; the reader must ultimately settle on an answer. The point that I want to stress is that the material and the immaterial

appear in a single image—in McCullers’s terms, they are “superimposed”—such that they become inseparable. Rather than resolving the tensions in their fiction between body and spirit, infirmity and illumination, and ideal and erotic love, McCullers and Dostoevsky preserve them through moments of silence, which always retain an ambiguity. Silence for McCullers and Dostoevsky is not about leaving something unsaid; it is rather about saying something without words.

The question at the end of *The Idiot* and *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* is the same: who is redeemed? The answer appears to be no one. In *The Idiot* Nastasya is dead while her murderer, Rogozhin, eventually recovers from brain fever only to be sent to Siberia for fifteen years. Myshkin lapses into a pre-epileptic coma and is sent back to Switzerland. In *Heart*, similarly, Singer’s suicide fragments the cherished illusions that the others characters cultivated during the novel. Each of his visitors, feeling betrayed, must cope with life after his death. Neither Blount nor Copeland is able to realize (or even articulate) their visions of social justice: the former drifts to another town while the latter is carted off to the country with his family. Mick, meanwhile, is stuck at a dead-end job at Woolworth’s. Only Biff, tending to the cafe, seems to escape with hope intact.

If Myshkin and Singer are Christ figures, they are diseased Christs who are unable, not unwilling, to save others. The role that they play by taking on the hopes, confessions, and requests of others forces them to confront tasks that are ultimately beyond their strength. As grotesque protagonists who measure the distance away from the ideal (Christ, love, communication), Singer and Myshkin stand as striking instances of their authors’ apophatic techniques. While Dostoevsky began representing more “positive” heroes, as we will see in the next chapter, McCullers continued to dramatize

the thwarted efforts of the lover to win over the beloved, no doubt drawing from her own experiences with triangulated relationships, sexual ambivalence, and unrequited love. Her inability to find love, or even to name it, accounts for the silences in her fiction and her personal life. It also accounts for McCullers's struggle to discover, or to create, characters as conflicted as she felt herself. No wonder she was drawn to Dostoevsky and his "idiot."

Chapter Four: Destructive Dialogue and Grotesque Perception in

As I Lay Dying, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*

I listen to the voices, and when I put down what the voices say, it's right.
Sometimes I don't like what they say, but I don't change it.

—William Faulkner (Cowley 114)

By “the voices” Faulkner has in mind the verbal sound of his fiction, which reverberates with the sound of a vast assortment of characters demanding to be heard. Sometimes these voices are comical and aggressive, filled with the foolishness of front-porch banter; other times they are solemn and speculative, probing the mysteries of long-ago events. But in every case Faulkner’s characters, like their author, hear and answer each other, just as the Bundrens “listen to the voices” on their way to Jefferson in *As Lay Dying*. Throughout the journey Darl and the others must endure Anse’s hangdog insistence that, whatever the expense, he will not “begrudge” Addie the money or resources for a proper burial—costs that prove to be steep indeed. When they finally reach town but lack a spade with which to bury her, Anse complains that a spade will cost money. Darl’s response turns his father’s familiar words against him: “Do you begrudge her it?” (*As I Lay Dying* 135).

This is only one of the myriad ways in which the Bundrens revise, parody, and respond to the voices around them. Each spoken word, as Bakhtin said of Dostoevsky’s characters, “is accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person” (*Problems*

32). Elsewhere he explains the way in which meaning, as a result of dialogue, resides in the space between contending voices:

Dialogue has penetrated inside every word, provoking in it a battle and the interruption of one voice by another... Thus, at the very beginning of the novel the leading voices in the great dialogue have already begun to sound. These voices are not self-enclosed or deaf to one another. They hear each other constantly, call back and forth to each other, and are reflected in one another (*Problems* 197).

In spite of its contentious nature, Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue was irrepressibly optimistic. At the end of the day, he believed, people would talk, listen, and learn from each other (Emerson, "Mysterious Visitor" 158-9). One might add that, as Bakhtin conceives it and Faulkner practices it, dialogue does not only occur between voices, but also *within* them. We can therefore no more escape from dialogue, even in discussions with ourselves, than a character like Quentin Compson can forget the voice of Miss Rosa or his father.¹

There is another important element here: the way in which Faulkner's own voice operates among and within the voices of his characters. This involved not only listening to and recording those voices that were comforting—perhaps Caddy, Dilsey, or Sam Fathers—but also to those characters who, like Jason Compson, speak vulgarity and violence with every word. "Sometimes I don't like what they say," Faulkner mused, as if he were a disapproving but tolerant secretary (Cowley 114). Faulkner's willingness to treat his characters as autonomous and even rebellious subjects is reminiscent of Bakhtin's distinction between the monologic and polyphonic novel. As a product of the author's imagination, the hero in a monologic novel is limited by the very fact that she

¹ Countless critics have acknowledged the dialogic dimensions of Faulkner's fiction. The best Bakhtinian readings of Faulkner, in my opinion, appear in Gray, Lockyer, Morris and Morris (197-218), and Ross. Insightful or merely cursory studies continue apace in every direction. In a recent overview of Faulkner criticism (1988-2008), Robert Bassett writes that "the articles using Bakhtin or merely dropping his name...are too plentiful to count" (7).

belongs to someone who is a literary creation and not a real person. In the polyphonic novel, however, of which Dostoevsky's fiction is the supreme example, the strict hierarchy between author and hero has been somehow dismantled. "A world of autonomous subjects, not objects" engage on equal terms with the author, who is one voice among many (*Problems* 7). As Gary Saul Morson puts it, the polyphonic novel "allows the hero to be truly free, capable of surprising not only other characters but also the author" (*Freedom* 91). The result is a novel that resembles "real life," with events and characters that are open-ended, unpredictable, and even startling. "I imagine that I know the characters pretty well," Faulkner once remarked, "though they do surprise me, too, in what they do" (Blotner and Gwynn).

Whether Faulkner or Dostoevsky actually achieved this special type of dialogic relationship—or whether polyphony can, in fact, exist at all—is debatable.² But what *is* certain, as their fiction amply demonstrates, is that both authors were keenly aware of the precarious balance between authors, narrators, and characters and they infused this sense of contentiousness throughout their fiction. Faulkner has often been called "the Dostoevsky of the South," a tag that has almost always implied shared concerns with themes of alienation, dispossession, and community—a "spiritual kinship," as Faulkner himself put it.³ My emphasis here, however, is with the way in which these themes, as part of Faulkner's and Dostoevsky's aesthetic project, are transposed into the texture of

² Bakhtin's notion of polyphony and its application to Dostoevsky's fiction are extremely controversial topics. Since my focus is on the relations of characters inside the text and not with the relation of the author to his characters, a detailed discussion of the term lays outside the scope of this chapter. I will say that, while I find the concept attractive, I am not sure if it is achievable. A good overview of polyphony in the specific context of Dostoevsky's fiction appears in Emerson's *The First Hundred Years* (127-161); see also Frank's "The Many Voices of Mikhail Bakhtin."

³ Blushteyn, Weisgerber, Gwynn, and Wasiolek explore thematic connections between Faulkner and Dostoevsky. To my knowledge, only Arthur Kinney, (51-53), Weisgerber (101-130), and Richard Gray (6-12) discuss the connection in terms of narrative structure.

their narratives. For both writers, the act of narration becomes a metaphor for living in the world.⁴ Listening to other voices and expressing one's own are major considerations of their novels—a task that is much easier said than done. While some characters occasionally achieve “a marriage of speaking and hearing” like Quentin and Shreve, more often than not harmonious participation gives way to destruction and mutual exclusion. As Judith Sutpen puts it,

You are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they don't know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug. (*Absalom* 127)

What we find here is less a chorus of voices than a shouting match in which the tellers argue, interrupt, and undercut each other; revise or re-imagine details of the story; jostle for control over the conditions of the telling; or, sometimes, refuse to talk at all in favor of silence and isolation. Conversation, as a result, exists in a precarious state of flux between dialogue and monologue, polyphony and cacophony.

The first aim of this chapter, then, is to explore precisely those moments when productive dialogue is resisted or undercut in Faulkner's and Dostoevsky's fiction, reflecting the disruptive, irrational, and subversive side of their vision. Their novels are filled with characters who, in their desire to usurp narrative authority, are often unwilling

⁴ See especially the work of Adam Newton, who argues for the ethical dimensions of narrative. Narrative fiction is crucial to ethical inquiry, he argues, because of the special way in which it creates and structures intersubjective relationships between authors, characters and readers. What happens in narrative fiction, then, is ethically relevant not only because we cognitively and emotionally identify with the events within it, but also because we engage in similar narrative constructions outside of fiction as well. Robert Louis Jackson has explored the ways in which aesthetics and ethics (or form and content) work together in Dostoevsky's fiction; Donald Kartiganer has similarly argued that, for Faulkner, “the imagination of form is a moral act, an exploration of the possibilities and the value of human conduct. Meaning and value reside in composition: the way one sees, the artfulness one devises, the love and courage one dares in order to wake the real into form” (xvii-xviii).

to share narrative space with others. Like Ivan Karamazov, Darl Bundren, Quentin Compson, and Rosa Coldfield strenuously resist other voices in order to impose control over the story. Through various strategies of isolation or exclusion—refusing to talk, failing to listen, objectifying others—they try to shut others out or shut them up. The natural progression of such narrative coercion leads to extreme emotional agitation, incapacity, or death. It also, as I will try to show, leads to the grotesque.

I argue, secondly, that a character's grotesquerie is one consequence of narrative coercion and isolation. In this respect the grotesque is less physical than mental. Darl's manic gaiety, Ivan's meeting with his "devil," Rosa's invocation of her "man-horse-demon," Quentin's vision of Sutpen's Hundred—all of these moments are the products of minds on the threshold that are poised between "death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation," in Geoffrey Harpham's words (18). As Faulkner's and Dostoevsky's distressed narrators occupy that liminal space wherein the grotesque resides, they—and we, as readers—experience a world in which what is real and unreal, or sane and mad, becomes difficult or impossible to distinguish. My attention in this chapter is thus divided between tracing the strategies of silencing, coercion, and exclusion that thrust characters onto the threshold; and, more specifically, those threshold moments themselves in which perception turns grotesque.

While Bakhtin was very good at accounting for the way in which Dostoevsky orchestrates the voices in his novels, he rarely considered the negative, destructive potential of dialogic discourse. "What Bakhtin declines to do," writes Malcolm Jones, "is to explore the consequences of failure to establish productive and creative subjective

relationships with others” (*Dostoevsky after Bakhtin* 191).⁵ Whereas Bakhtin argued positively by stressing his optimistic and controversial theory of polyphony, Faulkner and Dostoevsky often (but not always) argue negatively, showing the profound consequences of coercion and aggression. By examining the dark underbelly or the “negative” side of Bakhtinian dialogue, this chapter measures the distance between Bakhtin’s carnival grotesque and Kayser’s modern grotesque.

One challenge of examining the grotesque in Faulkner and Dostoevsky is that the three novels under consideration here—*As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*—are complex. I have tried to manage this complexity by pursuing a reading that is highly selective. My attention is limited to the four characters mentioned above; others will be treated briefly or not at all. In addition, my reading of Ivan is cumulative. The first section of the chapter, which reads Ivan alongside Darl, treats him in the context of *The Brothers Karamazov* as a whole in order to give a sense of the plot, Ivan’s narrative responsibilities, and his trajectory as a character. The second section, which reads him alongside Quentin and Miss Rosa, is confined to Book Eleven, in which Ivan’s internal crisis reaches its highest point of distress. In adopting this approach and tracing the grotesque among a few of Faulkner’s and Dostoevsky’s narrators, I hope to expand upon the dimensions of the grotesque that appeared in Chapters two and three. I also hope to show, as Andre Bleikasten has suggested, that certain aspects of Faulkner’s fiction remain to be explored: “Faulkner is a most singular writer, and more than anything

⁵ Caryl Emerson adds that “Bakhtin underestimates (as Dostoevsky never does) the sheer viciousness of the criminal imagination,” which includes lying, jealousy, greed, violence, and—above all—“spiritual pride” (*The First Hundred Years* 153). Her excellent study overviews both the reception of and critical objections to Bakhtin.

else it is his startling singularity, the unique strangeness of his work, that needs to be probed and defined” (“Singular” 214).

II. Grotesque Laughter

Ivan listened and looked at him dully; but suddenly his face began slowly spreading into a grin, and as soon as the judge, who looked at him in surprise, finished speaking, he suddenly burst into laughter. (*Brothers* 12.5, 575).

Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing, the heads turning like the heads of owls when he passed. “What are you laughing at?” I said. (*As I Lay Dying* 146)

Here are the two final images of Ivan Karamazov and Darl Bundren; we never see them again. In the first scene Ivan sits on the witness stand in front of a large crowd of onlookers, prepared to testify in support of his brother, Dmitri, who is charged with the murder of their father. No one believes Ivan’s feverish testimony, which is filled with incoherent language about the devil. Kicking and screaming, Ivan is carted away by the bailiff. In the second scene Darl has also been given over to the authorities in order to avoid a lawsuit for setting fire to Gillespie’s barn. Narrating the scene from both within and without, Darl rides the train to the asylum in Jackson as his family looks on. The rapid deterioration of these two remarkable, if disturbed, young men is stunning. Both characters are intelligent, sympathetic, and profoundly troubled; both are motherless and their fathers are buffoons (Fyodor proudly, Anse unintentionally); and both are thrust unwillingly into a family drama that demands their response. The most salient connection

between Darl and Ivan, however, is also the most obvious: their final outbursts of sudden, deeply ambiguous laughter.

“Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness which is defeated by laughter” (*Rabelais* 47). In this provocative remark, Bakhtin awards a special place to grotesque laughter within the medieval carnival. Laughter, he suggests, can overcome terror and fear—especially the folk laughter that, grounded in communal wholeness and the abundance of life, is “directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants” (*Rabelais* 11). Ivan’s and Darl’s laughter obviously exists apart from Bakhtin’s carnival. Laughing alone in front of a gaping crowd, they are uprooted from a community that has alienated and abandoned them. Far from defeating or overturning fear, laughter is itself the source of that which is terrible: “Laughter combined with bitterness which takes the grotesque form acquires the traits of mockery and cynicism, and finally becomes satanic” (Kayser 187). Here, carnival laughter turns bitter.

Bakhtin’s and Kayser’s competing forms of grotesque laughter—mocking and triumphant on the one hand, alienating and satanic on the other—are useful not only because of the laughter-filled scenes above but also, more broadly, because they both foreground the relationship between the individual and the community. Stubbornly believing in their own autonomy, Ivan and Darl seek mastery over the voices around them. For Ivan, this means detaching himself from others in fidelity to his “idea”; for Darl, it means objectifying others in order to fashion a coherent identity through language. In both cases, their preference for abstraction and isolation leads to their grotesquerie, culminating in solitary laughter and madness. I begin with a summary of

The Brothers Karamazov, paying special attention to Ivan's role in that rich text. Only then will it be possible to understand the way in which Ivan and Darl assume similar (but by no means identical) narrative roles in the multi-voiced arenas of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *As I Lay Dying*.

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In October 1877 Dostoevsky announced to his readers of *A Writer's Diary*, the monthly column to which he regularly contributed, that he was suspending publication at the end of the year. His attention would be devoted to "a literary work that has imperceptibly and involuntarily been taking shape within me over the two years" (*Diary* 1264). The work that he had in mind was, of course, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Dostoevsky's final novel that brings together ideas, motifs, and personal experiences that had absorbed him through his whole career and provides his most comprehensive artistic statement.⁶ Unlike plans for *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, which went through substantial overhauls, Dostoevsky seemed to have a clear sense of purpose from the start. "The notes for *The Brothers Karamazov*," writes Wasiolek, "are not those of germination, quest, and discovery. Dostoevsky knows what he is writing about; the subject is firm, the identities of the chief characters are fixed, and the basic dramatic situation is clear. Some of the scenes sketched in the notebooks are almost identical, even linguistically, with those of the final version" (12-13). While the novel is incredibly expansive both thematically and structurally—it is one of those "baggy monsters" that

⁶ Excellent discussions of the novel appear in Terras, Frank (*Prophet*, esp. 567-703), and Miller (*Worlds*).

Henry James complained about—the “subject” Dostoevsky had in mind so firmly was the breakdown of the Russian family.

The topic of the family, especially the relationship between fathers and sons, had preoccupied Dostoevsky his entire life. When Dostoevsky was seventeen his father was murdered, probably by his peasants. The significance of that traumatic event, which was certainly not lost on Freud,⁷ deeply informs a novel in which all three sons (four including Smerdyakov) can be considered responsible for their father’s death. Things were also getting worse, Dostoevsky believed, in mid-nineteenth-century Russia: “never has the Russian family been more unsettled, more disintegrated, more disarranged and unformed than it is now,” he wrote in 1877 (*Diary* 1034). Particularly distressing were the recent attempts on the life of the symbolic head of the Russian family, the Tsar-father Alexander II, who was finally assassinated in 1881. In a number of ways, then, the theme of parricide binds together many of Dostoevsky’s fears into a powerful symbol of the fragmentation of contemporary Russian life: “in their moral confusion,” writes Leatherbarrow, “sons turn against fathers, fathers fail their sons, subjects turns against the Tsar, and man abandons faith and rejects God, his divine father” (14).⁸

A devastating experience within Dostoevsky’s own family also had a profound effect on the genesis of the novel. Just as he began writing his youngest son, three-year-old Alyosha, died from what was most likely an epileptic seizure. Inconsolable and mad with grief, Dostoevsky blamed himself for Alyosha’s death because he believed that his

⁷ Freud, who considered *The Brothers Karamazov* “the most magnificent novel ever written” (98), famously and controversially claimed that Dostoevsky’s epilepsy resulted from guilt over his father’s death.

⁸ For an alternative emphasis on lateral, or brotherly, relationships in the novel, see Berman’s “Siblings in *The Brothers Karamazov*.”

child's disease was hereditary (Frank, *Prophet* 383-4). In Alyosha Karamazov, Dostoevsky would create through art the child that he had lost in life.⁹

The Brothers Karamazov hinges upon the conflict between Fyodor Karamazov, a lecherous and greedy landowner, and his eldest son Dmitri, a wayward ex-army officer. At the center of their dispute is an inheritance of 3,000 rubles that Dmitry claims is still owed to him, which is complicated by their rivalry over a woman, Grushenka, whose charms have led Dmitry to abandon his fiancé, Katerina Ivanovna. Fyodor lusts after Grushenka and has promised her 3,000 rubles if she will come to him.¹⁰ Fyodor has two other legitimate sons with his second wife: Ivan, an intellectual with a brilliant analytical mind; and Alyosha, the youngest, who has been living as a novice in a monastery with his spiritual mentor, Father Zosima. Although each brother is a distinct, complex character, they have often been viewed as a collective image of human nature, embodying the senses (Dmitri), the intellect (Ivan), and the spirit (Alyosha). A fourth half-brother, the sinister Smerdyakov, was apparently fathered by Fyodor when he raped a local mentally handicapped girl. Fyodor, however, does not acknowledge him as his son but employs him as his cook and servant. Neglected by his father and his siblings, Smerdyakov fosters a deep-seated resentment toward all of them except Ivan, whose ideas he admires. The

⁹ Both Shakespeare's Hamlet and Faulkner's "heart's darling," Caddy Compson, come to mind here: characters whose creation stemmed in part from their authors' explorations of memory, loss, and the writing process. John T. Matthews discusses the relationship between writing and loss in *The Sound and the Fury*, which was written shortly after Faulkner's loss of his daughter (17-23, 91-114).

¹⁰ Despite its reputation as a novel filled with lofty metaphysical themes, *The Brothers Karamazov* is obsessed with money: the precise sum of 3,000 roubles is mentioned literally hundreds of times and acquires powerful symbolic meaning. Katerina Ivanovna entrusts 3,000 rubles to Dmitri, which he misappropriates and frantically tries to borrow back from whomever he can (without success). The elder Karamazov uses that same amount as bait in order to lure Grushenka to his bed. At the trial the sum of the 3,000 roubles is dissected in minute detail. As a man who struggled with money as the result of poor financial management, gambling debts, and importunate relatives, the significance of money was surely not lost on Dostoevsky: "Let me say it again—the power of money was understood by everybody also in past time, but never until now was money considered in Russia to be the greatest thing in the world." (*Diary* Oct. 1876).

elder Karamazov has scarcely been a father even to his legitimate sons, whom he abandoned to be raised by various servants and relatives in order to focus on his carousing and debauchery.

When Fyodor is found dead in his home, an overwhelming amount of circumstantial evidence points to Dmitri as the murderer. He is known for his violent temper, is in desperate need of money, has had furious public disputes with his father (even threatening to kill him), and was spotted at the scene of the crime by his father's servant, Grigory. Perhaps the most damning evidence against Dmitri is that the precise amount that he owes Katerina, 3,000 roubles, was stolen from Fyodor on the night of the murder. He is arrested and tried under the new legal system.

Ivan, however, discovers that the actual murderer is Smerdyakov, who acted under the inspiration of Ivan's teachings. Early in the novel, when the family visits Zosima at the monastery, Ivan details his recent article that presents two stark, peculiar alternatives: either immortality exists and the church should rule the state or, in the absence of immortality, "all is permitted" (*Brothers* 2.6, 66). Although Ivan is unsure whether he really believes his own idea that everything is lawful without God, Smerdyakov interprets it as a subtle invitation to kill Fyodor—which he does, committing suicide shortly thereafter. Unhinged by guilt over his father's death, Ivan breaks down on the stand; his confused testimony is disregarded. Dmitri is convicted and sentenced to prison in Siberia.

If *The Brothers Karamazov* were solely about a family drama and a murder, it would be a memorable book. The meticulous way in which Dostoevsky constructs his mystery-thriller, culminating with the true identity of the murderer and the trial scene, is

gripping in its own right. But it is the intersection of moral-psychological themes with the murder plot that have led critics to consider the novel Dostoevsky's masterpiece. These themes hinge upon Ivan, who represents the young and (to Dostoevsky) misguided intellectual generation of the 1860s. With the details of the plot in mind, I want to return to the questions at the center of this chapter: As a narrator, how does Ivan position his voice in relation to others? How does he wrest authority away from other, competing narrators? Remarking on the multi-voiced narrative, Robert Belknap writes that "in place of one governing algorithm and one central character, each brother orders his part of the sequence of events according to his own rule" ("Narrative" 244). Dmitri's narrative is governed by passionate bursts of action; Alyosha's, by humility; Smerdyakov's, by aggression. Ivan's "rule," by contrast, is one of detachment, isolation, and coercion.

"Brother Ivan is a sphinx and is silent; he is always silent" (*Brothers* 6.4, 500). Dmitri's description is only one of numerous portraits of Ivan as a riddle, a sphinx, a tomb, or as somehow unknowable. Ivan is indeed mysterious, especially early in the novel. No one knows why he is in town or when he will leave. His political and religious views are unclear. It is hard to tell whether he takes his article on church law seriously. To some extent, Ivan's solitary lifestyle stems from his childhood. Sloughed off by Fyodor, he is bitterly conscious of living at the expense of a benefactor and, as a result, is "morose and reserved, though far from timid" (*Brothers* 1.3, 19). Throughout his young life, consequently (Ivan is twenty-four), he feels unloved and friendless, which pressures him to be self-sufficient. Smerdyakov astutely tells him that "you mind most of all about living in undisturbed comfort, without having to bow to anyone—that's what you care most about" (*Brothers* 11.8, 531). At dinner with Alyosha, Ivan tells his brother that he

wants to be friends with him, “for I have no friends and want to try it” (*Brothers* 5.3, 199). At the same time, he waits until the day before his departure to approach his brother because he believes that “it’s always best to get to know people just before leaving them” (*Brothers* 5.3, 199). After their lengthy conversation, Ivan grows angry at himself for violating his inconsistency; hitherto he has “been silent with the whole world and not deigned to speak” (*Brothers* 5.4, 230).

Most of all, Ivan’s intellectual position accounts for his isolation and his role as a narrator. Ivan stands in a long line of Dostoevskian anti-heroes stretching back to Stavrogin, Raskolnikov, and the Underground Man who are deeply alone, compulsive, and obsessed with questions of freedom and independence. Perhaps the best description of Ivan comes from Alyosha in a conversation with Dmitri: “Ivan is not seeking money or comfort. He is seeking suffering, perhaps...Ah, Misha, he has a stormy spirit. His mind is in bondage. He is haunted by a great, unsolved doubt. He is one of those who don’t want millions, but an answer to their questions” (*Brothers* 2.7, 75). Above all Ivan is concerned with questions of justice. In his conversation with Alyosha, which occurs just before the murder, Ivan makes his case for the fundamental injustice of life by citing examples of the abuse of children. He demands justice for undeserved sufferings, not at some undetermined time in the next world, which is the only answer that he finds in Christianity, but here and now, in this world. In response to Alyosha’s objections, Ivan recounts his “poem” of the Grand Inquisitor that, building upon the motif of justice, puts God (or more specifically the Christian faith) on trial.¹¹ Since God’s world cannot offer

¹¹ Ivan’s Legend describes how, during the Spanish Inquisition, Jesus decides to make a brief visit to Seville out of pity for the suffering and oppressed. Although everyone recognizes Him, the common people do nothing when the Inquisitor, a high official of the Church, orders His arrest. Visiting Christ in prison, the Inquisitor explains how he and the Church (and in an anachronistic implication, future socialists) have

this justice and harmony, in Ivan's view, he famously "returns his ticket" and rejects God's world.

The terrible stories of human cruelty that Ivan recounts lead him to despise humans as individuals even if he purports to love humanity as a whole. Ivan cannot love individually but only in the abstract sense—at an arm's length. Thus his withdrawal from society is driven, at least in part, by his skepticism of humanity's goodness and concealed hatred for his negligent father. Taking on himself responsibility for the entire cosmos, entering into a debate with God over the management of the universe, Ivan does not assume responsibility for the weak, insignificant people nearby. "If she is a child, then I'm not her nurse," is how Ivan responds to the sufferings of Lise, a teenage girl on whom Ivan imprints some of his teachings (*Brothers* 11.5, 506). "So am I my brother Dmitri's keeper?" he remarks in Cain-like indifference to his brother, whom he dislikes (*Brothers* 5.3, 200).

A crucial aspect of Ivan's narration, then, involves imposing his words on others, often to devastating effects. The act of furious talking, as Ivan (and his Inquisitor) does at great length in front of Alyosha (and Christ), allows him to dominate the conversation and preclude possible rejoinders. As Emerson notes, "For the great ideologues of the novel, the act of speaking out passionately (even if their topic is radical doubt) is largely a way of securing the floor and silencing others" ("Mysterious Visitor" 89). Ivan and his

completely rejected the essence of Christ's message—freedom—and presented as Christian teaching what is in fact its opposite. "We have corrected Thy work and founded it on *miracle, mystery* and *authority*," the Inquisitor tells Christ (*Brothers* 5.5, 233). The satisfaction of material needs, the need for something to worship, and the need for someone to provide universal unity—through the exercise of these powers the Inquisitor creates happiness on earth, the price of which is human freedom. At the end of the monologue Christ, who has remained silent, rises and kisses the old man. The Inquisitor, moved, frees his prisoner with a warning that he must never return. A summary hardly does justice to this famous section of the novel, which alone has generated a tremendous amount of criticism. The classic book-length study on the Legend is Ellis Sandoz's *Political Apocalypse*. For a more concise discussion, see Miller (*Worlds*, esp. "The Deep Heart's Core").

Inquisitor are two of the most prominent examples of this silencing impulse in action; what they really desire is to strong-arm the other (both their immediate interlocuters and also everyone else) into accepting their “word” as the only authentic one. Ivan yearns for the power that speaking gives but, at the same time, he sees others’ speaking as a potential threat.

One of Ivan’s peculiar traits is that, like Darl Bundren, his effort to remain aloof is paired with an intense desire to interfere in the lives of others, specifically Dmitri, Lise, Katerina, and others. As a means of preserving Ivan’s unknowability, these talks never appear directly but “off-stage,” as it were, with the content of the conversations being divulged only second-hand or not at all. Ivan’s most striking absence, which Smerdyakov interprets as a sign of approval to go through with Fyodor’s murder, occurs when Ivan distances himself from the escalating drama between Dmitri and his father. “One viper will devour the other,” he says, and he leaves for Moscow (*Brothers* 3.9, 126).

The response to Ivan’s position comes from Zosima, Alyosha’s spiritual mentor. Unlike Ivan, who admits that he can love “only those who live far away” (*Brothers* 5.4, 204), Zosima advocates an “active love” that stems not from the intellect but from one’s whole being. One must live this way, Zosima insists, because everything is connected: “All is like the ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth” (*Brothers* 6.3, 275). The epigraph to the novel, John 12.24, bears out this message.¹² A good character may die, but the memories and words of that person will continue, though they may lay dormant like seeds whose disappearance leads

¹²“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” As another “voice” in the text, the role of biblical quotation in the novel is both significant and controversial. See Perlina’s classic study and Jones’s *Dostoyevsky after Bakhtin*, especially 164-190.

to fruitfulness: “words become mediated and remediated—they float and settle like gossamer on the wind, spores, or seeds” (Miller, *Worlds* 32). The “seeds” of thoughts and memories are not all positive, however, and Ivan is wrapped back up into the plot precisely because the implication of his own doctrine, “all is permitted,” is carried out by others.

Dostoevsky clearly intended for Zosima’s section to stand as an indirect “refutation” of Ivan’s position.¹³ A more difficult question is whose voice, Zosima’s or Ivan’s, sounds more convincingly in the world of the novel. While critics and readers disagree, many of them—indeed, far more than Dostoevsky would have wished—side with Ivan.¹⁴ Bakhtin’s account of Dostoevsky’s novel as polyphonic surely remains the best (if controversial) answer of why so much disagreement exists. If Bakhtin is right, then the ethical and religious beliefs espoused in Dostoevsky’s non-fictional writings are present in his fiction, but they remain unprivileged; as one voice among many, they do not (and structurally cannot) have superiority over competing views. While Bakhtin implies that Dostoevsky’s polyvocal arena assembles itself into a stable whole (a notion that Dostoevsky may well have liked), the actual effect of his fiction, in my opinion, is very different. It is a world that tends toward chaos, instability, and hybridity in which a motley assortment of narrators exclude and disorient each other. Malcolm Jones,

¹³ Dostoevsky described his intention as “the portrayal of the uttermost blasphemy and the seed of the idea of destruction in our time in Russia among the young people uprooted from reality, and, along with the blasphemy and anarchy—the refutation of them, which is now being prepared by me in the last words of the dying elder Zosima...my protagonist’s [Ivan’s] blasphemy...will be solemnly refuted in the following (June) issue, on which I am now working with fear, trepidation, and reverence, since I consider my task (the rout of anarchism) a civic feat” (Frank, *Prophet* 428-9).

¹⁴ The Ivan-Zosima controversy offers the most pronounced example of the polarity among Dostoevsky’s interpreters that was discussed in Chapter Two in relation to O’Connor. In general, critics haven’t much liked Zosima, whose exhortations seems weak and melodramatic when compared to Ivan’s passionate tirade. Reasons for rejecting the elder vary widely; for a discussion of the mixed reception of Zosima, see Linner, *Zosima* 96-104.

paraphrasing Dmitri Karamazov, puts the matter very well when he writes that the world of Dostoevsky's novels "is both mysterious and fearful. The devil is struggling with God. The battle is not yet won and the battlefield is Dostoevsky's text" (*Dynamics* x). As we will see, similar "battlefield[s]" appear throughout Faulkner's fiction.

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The Brothers Karamazov was especially important to Faulkner. His personal library contained three copies of the Constance Garnett translation (Blotner 81-2) and he considered the novel an "old friend" that he would dip into occasionally (*University* 150). At the same time, as this excerpt from a 1930 interview suggests, his view of Dostoevsky was not uncritical:

Mr. Faulkner had a very interesting idea, centering about the thesis that Dostoevski could have written the *Brothers* in one third the space had he let the characters tell their own stories instead of filling page after page with exposition. In the future novel, or fiction—Mr. Faulkner contends—there will be no straight exposition, but instead, objective presentation, by means of soliloquies of speeches of the characters, those of each character printed in a different colored ink (*University* 18).

Faulkner's comments indicate that he saw Dostoevsky primarily as a stylist or, as he put it almost thirty years later, as a "craftsman."¹⁵ This attentiveness to form supports that notion that his interest in Dostoevsky went beyond the content of his fiction. His comments also raise questions about freedom and privacy that Faulkner considered so

¹⁵When a student asked what he thought of Dostoevsky, Faulkner responded, "He is one who has not only influenced me a lot, but that I have got a great deal of pleasure out of reading, and I will read him again every year or so. As a craftsman, as well as his insight into people, his capacity for compassion, he was one of the ones that any writer wants to match if he can" (*University* 69).

important. The claim that *The Brothers Karamazov* could have been written in “one third the space” implies that narrative exposition not only bogs down the reader with excessive details but also impinges on the freedom of characters to tell their own story and speak in their own voices. Faulkner’s (unrealized) plan to publish *The Sound and the Fury* in colored ink, as he alludes to in the interview, was an ambitious effort to expunge “straight exposition” from the text.

It should also be noted that his comment offers one example among many of the unpredictable and even fickle nature of Faulkner’s artistic views and his public persona.¹⁶ Only a few years after commenting on the “dead weight” of an expository narrator, he would create a rather weighty novel of his own, *Absalom, Absalom!*, that re-inserts an external narrator and, as I will discuss below, bears remarkable affinities to the structure of Dostoevsky’s novel. Perhaps Faulkner realized that no amount of “objective presentation” can hide the fact that the authorial voice is always there in his narratives—not, usually, as an authoritative figure but as one voice among many.

As I Lay Dying is a remarkable hybrid. The novel is perhaps unique in its “dizzying capacity to shift between not only different voices but different genres without allowing the reader time to adjust” (Gray 151). The narrative draws, for example, on folk tales, epic, tragedy, comedy, ballad, and as such is embedded in the traditional cultures of the South and Southwestern humor. Where Faulkner parts company with these traditions and aligns himself with writers like McCullers, O’Connor, and Dostoevsky is in his

¹⁶Taking Faulkner at his word has always been risky. Joel Williamson, in a confession rare for any biographer, puts it this way: “Perhaps no American writer between the World Wars wrote so well without leaving home, and probably none was so deeply unknowable.... Faulkner would remain very much a man of mystery. When pressed, he offered stories that were, in effect, deceptive, and made statements that contradicted themselves or were so elliptical as to be nearly meaningless. Virtually no one, it seems, ever knew the real Faulkner” (5).

willingness to blend and mix genres: to move between them, and sometimes collate them, in a way that boldly conflates the comic with the tragic. So too does this hybridity manifest itself in voice. As Stephen Ross has pointed out, these voices exhibit striking variations in tone, ranging from the dialect of the poor white Mississippi farmer, the banter of small-town shopkeepers, the confused musings of a child, and the richly metaphorical digressions of a redneck poet (111-129). Voices join to tell us about their lives, to agree, to present evidence or just to argue. No one voice can be regarded as authoritative but equally no voice can be discounted either.

One effect of this hybridity is that it makes it difficult for us to “know” the Bundrens or for them to “know” each other. The novel restlessly oscillates between character as object and character as subject over the course of its fifty-nine monologues, creating a fascinating “interpenetration of interiorities” (Morris and Morris 151). After being defined by others, characters can bring their own perspective to bear; each Bundren tells us about a dimension of his or her personality that no outside observer can properly know. Identity thus exists, as Gray tells us, “in the clash of voices, *between* the different consciousnesses that continually debate” (342). Many of the Bundrens, however, strenuously resist the notion that one’s identity is the product of an unfinished, intersubjective dialogue. They (and we) are generally happier with certainty: living with people whom they can comfortably categorize and pin down. Throughout the novel people are constantly watching each other carefully, as if the act of silent, concentrated observation will put the observed in his or her place.

While many characters give in to the temptation to watch rather than participate, Darl Bundren carries this impulse to the extreme. “That’s ever living thing the matter

with Darl,” Tull observes: “he just thinks by himself too much” (*As I Lay Dying* 41). As the most sensitive, eloquent, and troubled narrator, Darl is both strangely detached from the rest of his family and keenly intent upon interfering in their private affairs. Darl demonstrates that a dialogic model does not prevent its characters from trying to define each other and their world monologically—that is, as a condition in which “another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 285). In Darl’s monologues this object-ification is strikingly literal: under the pressure of his “queer eyes,” subjects morph into objects as solid and immobile as wood (*As Lay Dying* 72). Jewel easily suffers the most from Darl’s ossifying glare. “Motionless, wooden-backed, wooden-faced,” Jewel strides “with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian” (*As I Lay Dying* 3). His eyes (“pieces of broken plate”), his fixed stare, his stiff figure, everything about Jewel is rigid—everything, that is, except his legs, which are “endued with life from the hips down” (*As I Lay Dying* 4). For, just as Darl tries to fix Jewel, so does Jewel’s furious mobility represent his efforts to wriggle free of Darl’s gaze. Darl’s monologic vision thus seeks to fix or limit others while simultaneously preventing others from objectifying *him*.

To some extent, Darl’s tendency to objectify others resembles Ivan’s efforts to impose his “word” on others in order to assert his control as a narrator. It is important to note, however, that Ivan’s crisis is largely philosophical; he stubbornly clings to his “idea” and, in doing so, more closely resembles Quentin Compson’s devotion to southern honor. Darl’s crisis, on the other hand, comes from a lack of identity, which he tries to create through language. Hyperconscious and hypersensitive, Darl’s struggle to “know” his family members is, at bottom, a furious attempt to know himself, to fashion an

identity that remains beyond his grasp. Whereas Jewel “does not know that he is not,” Darl is painfully aware that, as he puts it, “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not” (*As I Lay Dying* 46).

While the source of Darl’s crisis is ultimately a mystery, in large part it stems from “the tragic complexity of motherless childhood,” (87) as Faulkner wrote in *Go Down, Moses*.¹⁷ Darl struggles to define himself apart from Addie, who has never wanted, accepted, or loved him. Darl’s miraculous perception depends entirely upon his ability to use language to define himself; he lives in language more than anyone. As a devoted follower of “the word,” Darl distances himself from precisely those tangible things on which his siblings ground their identities: a horse, a coffin, an unborn child, a fish in the dirt. But Addie, of course, insists that words are entirely inadequate to capture experience: her own harsh and persistent talking denies that language can ever bridge the gap between oneself and the world.¹⁸

Darl struggles mightily to fashion a coherent identity while simultaneously destroying Addie’s influence over him. Just as he objectifies the other Bundrens, Darl tries to contain, delimit, and eliminate his mother’s influence through “metaphors of confinement,” as Homer Pettey puts it (27). Consider this description of Cash looking at Addie, a moment that Darl narrates remotely on his way to town:

He looks up at the gaunt face framed by the window in the twilight. It is a composite picture of all time since he was a child. He drops the saw and lifts the board for her to see, watching the window in which the face has not moved. He

¹⁷ Another potential source is his experience in the war. Though Darl’s experience in France are never described, it resembles the unmentioned but obviously traumatic experience of war to Hemingway’s Nick Adams and Faulkner’s other shell-shocked characters, especially Bayard Sartoris and Donald Mahon.

¹⁸ The great irony of Addie’s harangue against words, as Faulkner’s critics enjoy pointing out, is that Addie uses words to express their futility. Ross, for instance, writes that “Addie’s *voice*, above all, demonstrates the irony (and inevitability) of human existence in language and belies her own claim for “reality” over “words” (127-8). Nowhere is this irony stronger than in Addie’s decision to take Whitfield, a master of the hypocritical word, as her lover.

drags a second plank into position and slants the two of them into their final juxtaposition, gesturing toward the ones yet on the ground, shaping with his empty hand in pantomime the finished box. For a while still she looks down at him from the composite picture, neither with censure nor approbation. Then the face disappears. (As *I Lay Dying* 28)

The entire scene is rendered in terms of frames. Addie's "gaunt face," which is itself a "composite picture" suggestive of a framed image, is framed by the window; Cash's coffin will eventually enframe Addie; and Darl's narrative frames the scene. "Frames," Pettey adds, "set boundaries for the object perceived and create borders to contain the object...the framing metaphors expose Darl's desire to arrest Addie's power over him" (3). But his efforts fail. When he tries to confine his mother in an image of the window-frame (an image played out entirely in Darl's imagination), her face vanishes from the window. Addie eludes Darl's gaze and also makes him painfully aware of his own objectification.

Darl tries to enclose others and objectify them through language, but they constantly elude his efforts. Jewel keeps frantically moving; Addie's face darts away from the window. This painful truth leads to a crucial moment in the novel: the point at which Darl's narrative strategies against Addie—objectifying and enframing her—intersect with his physical act of setting fire to Gillespie's barn, an event that illustrates his inexorable ties to language, its link to his madness, and his grotesque perception. For the first time in the novel, Darl acts: he decides to burn down the barn, presumably, in order to end the journey. Yet, at the same time, his act seems designed less to end what is for him a senseless debacle than to offer an opportunity to give an intensely lyrical description of it. The burning hay appears "like a portiere of flaming beads"; Jewel runs into the fire like "a figure cut from tin" and, when he struggles with Gillespie, they

appear as “figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare” (*As I Lay Dying* 374). As the language rises to poetic heights, so does Darl’s remoteness from the scene intensify. Nowhere in his description is there any indication that the monologue is coming from the man who started the fire.

Darl’s almost unbearably poetic language is his only tool for making sense of a world that, for him, has grown senseless and absurd; the rituals of family and society become madness in the eyes of Darl, who himself is thought to be mad. Darl’s perception is grotesque, then, because his strange way of seeing *combines* the ideal—clairvoyance, “seeing all”—with its degradation: madness, incoherence, non-sense.¹⁹ In response to a student who asked how Darl was such a gifted narrator, Faulkner replied,

Who can say how much of the good poetry in the world has come out of madness, and who can say just how much of super-perceptivity the—a mad person might not have? It may not be so, but it’s nice to think that there is some compensation for madness. That maybe the madman does see more than the sane man. That the world is more moving to him. That he is more perceptive. He has something of clairvoyance, maybe, a capacity for telepathy (University 121-22).

Darl’s “super-perceptivity” allows him to apparently tell the future, narrate events when he is not physically present, and wordlessly intuit the deepest thoughts of his family members, especially Dewey Dell. But to see all is also to see too much, to become unable to break up experience into manageable parts.²⁰ Above all, Darl is blind to his family’s decision to commit him to an asylum.

¹⁹ It is worth recalling Bakhtin’s understanding of grotesque realism as “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (*Rabelais* 25).

²⁰ See, for instance, Louis Sass, whose study *Madness and Modernism* forwards the unique thesis that madness does not derive from the lack of reason but from too much of it: “[madness] is the end-point of the trajectory [that] consciousness follows when it separates from the body and the passions, and from the social and practical world, and turns in upon itself” (4). For Sass, Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* (who else?) provides the paradigmatic example of a man suffering from “too much consciousness” (4).

“Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams” (*As I Lay Dying* 146). Darl’s isolation, his framing metaphors, and his efforts to cordon off different parts of experience result, paradoxically, in a total separation from everything, even himself. No longer able to distinguish between subject and object, his final monologue slips listlessly between “I,” “you,” and “he.” The difference between unreason and reason, insider and outsider, is the difference between Darl and Cash. Cash traces limits, builds enclosures, and thinks in taut, rational terms; he eventually restores sanity to the Bundrens’ narrative. Darl, on the other hand, “is destined to be forever an onlooker and an outsider, floating in a limbo—a space without boundaries, a time without measure, a world without pattern and purpose” (Bleikasten, *Ink* 209). Darl’s sense of being unmoored is captured in his grotesque laughter. For Henri Bergson, laughter epitomizes flux, movement and inescapable change through time (15). Any effort to impose closure—with rituals, with unchanging truths, with imposed forms of any kind—produces absurdity. Darl’s laughter, then, signals the breakdown of fixed limits and his inability to live in a world of artificial, but necessary, boundaries that his family and community are all too willing to impose. Unlike the rest of his family, especially Jewel and Dewey Dell, Cash is reluctant to give over Darl to the authorities, although he does not sanction Darl’s actions. Cash alone recognizes that, for his brother, “This world is not his world; this life his life” (*As I Lay Dying* 242).

While the origins of Darl’s madness are ambiguous—if Faulkner is to be believed, he was “mad from the first” (*University* 109)—Ivan’s mental collapse is perhaps more surprising because of his status as an eminently reasonable, indeed brilliant,

thinker. Like Darl, Ivan tries to detach himself from the family drama but fails. He slowly and painfully suspects that, in contrast to the moral and philosophical position that Ivan outlines at length, he is his brother's keeper; he is responsible for the actions of others (especially those he teaches); and he is guilty of murdering his father, even if he did not strike the fatal blow. While Ivan never fully accepts this position, he is nevertheless driven to confess publicly his role in the murder in a last-ditch effort to save his brother. Still more humiliating for a proud person like Ivan is the understanding that, even when confessing, it is likely that no one will believe him now that Smerdyakov is dead by suicide. Confessing in such circumstances is an utterly irrational act, senseless and ridiculous.

When Ivan gives his feverish testimony, everyone in the room—the judges, the lawyers, the crowd, and the narrator recounting the scene—consider Ivan crazy. The bailiff, seizing Ivan by the shoulders, “flung him violently to the floor. But the police were on the spot and he was seized. He screamed furiously. And all the time he was being removed, he yelled and screamed something incoherent” (*Brothers* 12.5, 578). The social nature of shame and suffering is a characteristic feature of Dostoevsky's novels: sitting on the stand, Ivan is literally on display. Morson writes that “In Dostoevsky's novels, suffering, shame, torture, and death usually take place before a crowd of spectators, who engage in the quintessential social act of gaping” (“Misanthropology” 62).²¹ There is fascination-repulsion in the crowd's response to madness, accompanied by the nervous intuition that he may express some truth that lays

²¹ Another example, to return briefly to *Crime and Punishment*, is Marmeladov's death scene in his house. Semyon's pathetic final words to his wife are spoken in a room that is “so full of people that you couldn't have dropped a pin. The policemen left, all except one, who remained for a time, trying to drive out the people who came in from the stairs” (*Crime and Punishment* 2.7, 172).

outside reason and “normal” society. Along with the crowd that watches Ivan on the stand and Darl on the wagon, we cannot look away.

Ivan’s ejection from the orderly, “sane” arena of the law belies an important fact: that, excepting Alyosha (and the reader), Ivan is the only person who knows the truth about the murder. Throughout the entire trial scene, after Ivan has been dismissed, we must sit through countless misinterpretations of the night of the crime, knowing that Ivan’s account is correct but knowing, too, that by common standards his account is “mad.” Dostoevsky thus establishes the reader as a sort of judge—not of Dmitry, but of the courtroom. The entire system of (Western) law, including the judge, jury, and especially the lawyers, is put on trial. Dostoevsky suggests that only intuition and moral perception—the type of insight that Zosima possesses in the opening “trial” at the monastery—will produce a just verdict. While Ivan’s future remains a mystery, his grotesque laughter on the stand may signal a breakthrough as much as a breakdown—for, as we have seen with Raskolnikov and Myshkin, the space between conversion and de-conversion, between renewal and death, is razor-thin.

Faulkner and Dostoevsky’s tormented protagonists represent the dangers of becoming passive and disengaged. Darl succumbs to the temptation to watch rather than participate. First incarcerated in his own private world of observation, he ends up literally imprisoned in the Mississippi State Asylum. Ivan, preferring to coerce others, goes through a painful process of self-discovery that places him on the brink of insanity. Just as we are unsure of what to make of the novels as a whole—epic or ballad, tragedy or comedy—so too is Darl’s and Ivan’s madness ambiguous, an intermingling of insight and

incapacity. As Harpham puts it, “it is the interval of the grotesque that we must suffer through in the way to the discovery of a radical new insight” (46).

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As I Lay Dying is unique among Faulkner’s novels in its emphasis on the life of a single family of country people whose lives are, for the most part, free from the historical obsessions and race-related concerns that occupied so much of Faulkner’s imagination. These concerns would return with a vengeance in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel that is perhaps *the* definitive exploration of southern regionalism, memory, race, and identity. In returning to these questions Faulkner, whether consciously or unconsciously, moved much closer to the structure of the weighty Dostoevsky novel from which he distanced himself only a few years earlier. The similarities can be understood in terms of layering—both temporal and spatial—that Robin Miller discusses in terms of a helpful “onion” metaphor. The resemblance of *The Brothers Karamazov* to an onion, she explains, relates not only to its narrative layers—its author, narrator-chronicler, secondary characters, and a host of embedded narrators—but also to the overlapping genres that, if one wishes, can be “peeled back” and examined independently: “a crime novel superimposed on a psychological novel, superimposed on a family novel, superimposed on a metaphysical novel, and so forth” (85). The same can be said of *Absalom*.

Both novels are also concerned with memory and recovering the past—or, better, experiencing the present *through* the past. The theme of memory emerges in the first sentence of *The Brothers Karamazov* with the statement that Fyodor Karamazov's death was still recollected after thirteen years; it recurs until the final sentence, which begins with a service of eternal memory for a dead child and ends with a speech about childhood memories. The importance of recollection is even more crucial during Dmitri's interrogation and trial, when a host of primary and secondary characters try to accurately reconstruct the night of the murder. Just as the primary tellers in *Absalom!* cannot agree upon a satisfactory interpretation of Sutpen's failure and Bon's death, so too are the principal narrators in Dostoevsky's novel—Ivan, Alyosha, the prosecuting and defending lawyers, and even Dmitri, the primary suspect—in disagreement over the details of Fyodor Karamazov's murder.²²

An elaborate type of spatial distancing (or mediation) also appears in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Characters routinely tell stories in which other, secondary narrator tell *their* stories, and so on. An extreme example of deferred narration appears in Book Six, *The Russian Monk*, in which Alyosha transcribes Zossima's early life as he remembers it. The narrator (writing thirteen years later) cites another retrospective account, Alyosha's, in which Zossima recalls a moment from his youth when he hears a priest read the story of Job from the Bible. Zosima's words are thus refracted through a

²² Albert Guerard has observed that "The brilliant but crucially misinformed conjectures of prosecuting and defending lawyers [in *The Brothers Karamazov*], the subtle play of mind that achieves a kind of truth of fact, offer important adumbrations of Faulkner's method" (305). Like Ippolit and Fetyukovich, the two lawyers from the trial scene, Mr. Compson and Quentin/Shreve represent a similar contrast in narrative method whereby narrative reporting gives way to narrative invention. Interestingly, when Faulkner was asked if he read detective stories, he replied, "Well, I like a good one like *The Brothers Karamazov*" (*Lion in the Garden* 217). A few critics have briefly discussed similarities between the two novels. See Weisgerber, 101-105, Guerard, 324, and Rabinowitz.

complex prism of narrators. Far from being a solitary instance in the novel, a similar type of deferral occurs in the transmission of Ivan's Legend, in which the narrator tells of Ivan's unwritten poem about an imaginary character who may have imagined his encounter with Christ.

Faulkner's narrative technique "raises to a rule what was only an experiment in Dostoevsky" (Weisgerber 105). Every voice is irrepressibly speculative: "maybe," "perhaps," and "probably" becomes the standard currency of narration, while the narrative itself is an elaborate and often bewildering network of "old tales and talking" (*Absalom* 295)—conversations overheard, stories told at several removes, partial disclosures, imaginative conjectures, bold guessing and flagrant invention. Quentin, Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Shreve all contribute to a telling of the story of the doomed Sutpen family, with their own unique versions that are rife with ambiguity, imaginings, and basic ignorance. The absence of any authoritative voice adds to the confusion, as the tellers participate in a grand debate in which everyone sees the story differently, exists in different relations to it, and has conflicting motives for interpreting and understanding it. It is true that, to some degree, an external narrator clarifies the other narrators' distortions.²³ At the same time, however, the narrator offers his own opinions and seems genuinely interested in the Sutpen story as an act of creation. Quentin and Shreve's account, the narrator tells us, is "probably true enough" (*Absalom* 335).

Like Christ in Ivan's Legend, Sutpen is the "absolute" who lays hidden behind veils of narration. We hear his words only as they are shaped by and through others.

²³ "The narrator's periodic appearances do help in various ways to restore the reader's bearings in a world of slanted perceptions, thereby creating the impression that he is slowly unwinding a reality from its corkscrewed encasement in distorted perceptions" (Forrer 32). Kuyk places great emphasis on the external narrator, writing that "the third-person narrator has immense powers of perception and expression" (35).

When we *do* hear Sutpen's words, it is only through a radical form of narrative deferral: Quentin listens to his father tell him what *his* father, General Compson, learned from Sutpen during their hunt for the architect. As the information gets passed along, the probability of distortion grows. While many early interpretations were driven by efforts to "solve" the mystery—Cleanth Brooks and, more recently, Dirk Kuyk come to mind—most contemporary readings of the novel assume, with Mr. Compson, that "It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know" (*Absalom* 100).²⁴ Indeed, one of the great attractions of the novel is less the details of the story than the way in which the tellers' pursuit of truth allegorizes the act of interpretation.²⁵

The last thing I intend to do here is weigh in on this well-worn debate. Instead, I explore the technique by which, as McElroy puts it in his discussion of a grotesque point-of-view, "the reins of a novel are delivered into the hands of a first person narrator who is insane or quite possibly insane, thereby making the world of the novel the world as he experiences it" (95). This strategy, I argue, is central to *Absalom, Absalom!* in which the tellers who are most invested in unraveling the Sutpen mystery are those characters whose sanity is in question. No one is more distressed by Sutpen's story than Quentin Compson. I trace how Ivan's refusal to engage in conversation with others—and even with himself—resembles Quentin Compson's rebellion against his role as a passive

²⁴ Matthews's influential *Faulkner's Play of Language* expresses the narrative dilemma well: "The narratives of *Absalom* behave as rival offspring of the novel; the marriages of speaking and hearing issue in contending interpretations whose legitimacy or illegitimacy cannot finally be judged" (152).

²⁵ When critics like Brooks or J. Hillis Miller weigh in on *Absalom*, their arguments are surely "about" something far more than deciding whether the mystery of Charles Bon's death can be explained: they are concerned with the viability of their own methodologies. Wolfgang Holdheim offers a good description of the stakes involved in interpreting books like *Absalom* and *The Brothers Karamazov*: "The detectory schema, and the related trial schema are in fact metaphors for the very act and possibility of understanding—enactments of the interpretation of reality, demonstrations that chaos can be shaped and made coherent, that sense can be made of the world" (126).

listener. In both cases their isolation and refusal to talk results, respectively, in Ivan's meeting with his "devil" and Quentin's nightmarish vision of Sutpen's Hundred. I also discuss how Quentin's position is inseparable from Miss Rosa, whose voice demands to be heard but who, nevertheless, is shut out by the other (male) tellers of the story.

III. Grotesque Visions

"Visions—they are, so to speak, rags and tatters of other worlds, their beginning. A healthy man, of course, has no reason to see them, because a healthy man is the most earthly of men and so must live only an earthly life, for the sake of completion and orderliness. But as soon as he falls ill, as soon as the normal earthly order in the organism is disturbed, the possibility of another world appears, and the more ill he is, the more contact there is with the other world."

—Svidrigailov (*Crime and Punishment* 4.1, 260)

For the first half of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan's interior life remains obscure; he is presented externally as an opaque "tomb" (*Brothers* 3.4, 100). After Fyodor's death and Ivan's return from Moscow, however, we are granted access to Ivan's interior thoughts and, consequently, his private struggle to come to terms with his responsibility in his father's murder. As many critics have noted, the anguish that Ivan faces is from a failure to listen to his internal voice—the "voice of his conscience."²⁶ The crisis reaches its peak in Book Eleven, which marks the point at which the philosophical themes of the novel, especially the questions of guilt and atonement, merge with the detective plot.

Ivan's refusal to speak to others eventually causes an internal split in which Ivan is forced

²⁶ Frank writes that the continuing power of the novel "derives from its superb depiction of the moral-psychological struggle of each of the main characters to heed the voice of his or her own conscience, a struggle that will always remain humanly valid and artistically persuasive whether or not one accept the theological premises without which, as Dostoevsky believed, moral conscience would simply cease to exist" (*Prophet* 571).

to confront his own words in another's mouth. He first meets with Alyosha, who approaches Ivan out of love and concern; next, he visits Smerdyakov three times, who tries to exacerbate Ivan's already troubled condition; finally, Ivan experiences an unsettling and outrageous meeting with his "devil."

While Ivan's internal conflict does not emerge until later in the novel, there are traces of it from the start. Zosima, for instance, perceives that Ivan brings up his article "from desperation": "That question is not solved in you, and it is your great grief, for it demands an answer (*Brothers* 2.6, 66). This "question" is neither exclusively personal nor academic; it plays out in the real-life drama of his father's murder. As a result, Ivan begins to experience strong pangs of guilt and uneasiness, as much as he tries to suppress them. While the question of Ivan's responsibility is deferred for a long time, it reemerges when Ivan, having returned home after the murder, questions his own complicity.

Alyosha, who shares Zosima's intuitive perception, realizes that Ivan has been tormented by feelings of guilt over his father's death. Alyosha's response to his brother, framed in order to dis-identity Ivan from Smerdyakov, marks one of his most passionate utterances in the novel:

"Who is the murderer then, according to you?" [Ivan] asked, with apparent coldness. There was even a supercilious note in his voice. "You know who," Alyosha pronounced in a low, penetrating voice. "Who? You mean the myth about that crazy idiot, Smerdyakov?" Alyosha suddenly felt himself trembling all over. "You know who," broke helplessly from him. He could scarcely breathe. "Who? Who?" Ivan cried almost fiercely. All his restraint suddenly vanished. "I only know one thing," Alyosha went on, still almost in a whisper, "it wasn't you who killed father." "Not you! What do you mean by 'not you'?" Ivan was thunderstruck. "It was not you who killed father, not you!" Alyosha repeated firmly. (*Brothers* 11.5, 507)

These words take on an almost incantatory tone, as if Alyosha's repetition is intended to liberate Ivan from despair. The acute sensitivity with which Alyosha is able to intuit Ivan's inner fears and guilt, which Frank aptly describes as a sort of "psychic interweaving," offers the first instance of Ivan's hidden thoughts being voiced by another ("Voices" 38).²⁷ Alyosha's insight is, for Ivan, a great violation of his privacy, much like Dewey Dell's deep resentment of Darl for intuiting the secret of her pregnancy. Ivan is so enraged by this divination of his concealed thoughts that he breaks off all relations with his brother "from this moment and probably forever" (*Brothers* 11.6, 508).

Having rejected Alyosha for the moment, Ivan is impelled toward three discussions with his insidious double, Smerdyakov.²⁸ Like Ivan, Smerdyakov is isolated and lonely, although his marginal status is forced upon him. Old Man Karamazov and the rest of the community verbally abuse him for being the bastard child of a mentally handicapped woman, and he further suffers from epileptic fits. Ivan takes an early interest in Smerdyakov and discusses philosophical questions—although, as mentioned above, their dialogues appear off-stage. What irritates Ivan, however, is the "peculiar revolting familiarity" that Smerdyakov displays toward him, an intimacy suggesting that they have "some kind of compact, some secret between them, that had at some time been expressed on both sides, only known to them and beyond the comprehension of those around them" (*Brothers* 5.6, 232). This "secret," as Smerdyakov understands it, is a shared hatred of

²⁷ This scene offers an exemplary instance of Bakhtin's notion of the "double-voiced word": "Two characters are always introduced by Dostoevsky in such a way that each of them is intimately linked with the internal voice of the other, although a direct personification of this voice never again appears (with the exception of Ivan's devil). In their dialogue, therefore, the rejoinders of the one touch and even partially coincide with the rejoinders of the other's interior dialogue. A deep essential bond or partial coincidence between the borrowed words of one hero and the internal and secret discourse of another hero—this is the indispensable element in all of Dostoevsky's crucial dialogues" (*Problems* 254-55).

²⁸ As a number of commentators have pointed out, Ivan has many doubles in the novel: two minor characters, Rakitan and Kolya, Smerdyakov, and the devil. See Kanevskaya, Jones 78, 169-70, and Kantor.

their father and an unspoken complicity in his murder, which is sanctioned by Ivan's claim that "all is permitted" and tacitly approved when Ivan leaves for Moscow.

"Drawn by a sudden and irresistible prompting," Ivan visits Smerdyakov three times (*Brothers* 11.8, 522). While the first two meetings are filled with pregnant silences and innuendo, in their third meeting Smerdyakov tears away the last shred of Ivan's self-deception and reveals the true significance of his behavior. "You are still responsible for it all," he tells Ivan, "since you knew of the murder, sir, and charged me to do it, sir, and went away knowing all about it. And so I want to prove to your face this evening that you are the only real murderer in the whole affair, sir, and I am not the real murderer, though I did kill him. You are the rightful murderer" (*Brothers* 11.8, 527). Smerdyakov uses this insidious logic to accuse Ivan of not merely consenting to the murder but also having inspired it.²⁹ Unlike Alyosha, whose words are framed out of love and reconciliation, Smerdyakov mocks and torments Ivan, seeking to convince him that they are identical and that Ivan is the real murderer. Thus, as Kantor has pointed out, Ivan "swings between" the assertions of Alyosha ("It's not you!") and Smerdyakov ("You are the rightful murderer!") (202).

The three interviews between Ivan and Smerdyakov are significant not only for the way in which they reveal the extent of Ivan's responsibility for the murder of his father, but also for the way they prepare for Ivan's nightmare. Ivan's instability culminates in a powerful experience of the grotesque in which the lines between reality and unreality, the natural and the supernatural, and religious and psychological

²⁹ A much-debated question concerns the extent to which Ivan—not to mention Dmitri and even Alyosha—are responsible for Fyodor's death. Miller writes that "Smerdyakov is the first to raise the philosophical question that each of the brothers must eventually face: Where is the ethical boundary between thought and deed? At what point does thought become deed?" (*Worlds* 45).

explanations are blurred to the point of being indistinguishable. The scene hinges on a question that emerges subtly and inexplicitly from the start: Is Ivan going mad or is he literally being visited by the devil? On the one hand, Dostoevsky took every measure to ensure the medical accuracy of this critical chapter. Ivan's doctor tells him that he is "suffering from some disorder of the brain" that could very likely lead to hallucinations (*Brothers* 9.9, 533).³⁰ But like other images and motifs in the novel—seeds, stones, silence—readings of the chapter cut both ways. Perhaps the devil is no hallucination. Perhaps Dostoevsky wished his readers and Ivan to suspect that the devil himself might actually have dropped in for a visit. Dostoevsky himself believed in the devil and, like Flannery O'Connor in *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960), wished to alert modern readers to his potential existence. At the same time, he was well aware that his readers would balk at the sudden introduction of the devil into a novel that had previously operated within the confines of realism, however extraordinary.

It is worth mentioning here that the preservation of uncertainty is a fundamental part of Dostoevsky's general practice of "fantastic realism," as he detailed in a letter to an aspiring novelist: "The fantastic in art has its limits and rules. The fantastic must come so close to the real that you are obliged to *almost* believe in it" (Frank, *Prophet* 536). Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, Dostoevsky continues, represents "the summit of fantastic art...you believe that Hermann really had a vision, and one precisely in conformity with his worldview, but meanwhile, at the end of the story...you don't

³⁰ Others also recognize his strange condition. "You look strange as you speak" Alyosha notices with uneasiness, "and you seem to be in some kind of madness" (*Brothers* 5.5, 206). On the other hand, Ivan admits to Alyosha that the devil has already visited him: "Do you really know he comes to me? How did you find out? Speak!" (*Brothers* 11.5, 507).

know...whether the vision was a result of Hermann's nature, or whether he is really one of those people who have come into contact with another world" (Frank, *Prophet* 536). The fantastic, as Dostoevsky sees it, hinges upon a moment when a character (and by extension the reader) experiences something that is inexplicable and hesitates, as Hermann does when the ghost of his lover's grandmother (whom he has just murdered) appears before him.³¹

Precisely the same confusion occurs when Ivan, sitting alone and "almost conscious himself of his delirium," sees a strange figure sitting on the adjacent sofa:

Someone appeared to be sitting there, though goodness knows how he had come in, for he had not been in the room when Ivan Fyodorovich came into it, on his return from Smerdyakov. This was a person or, more accurately speaking, a Russian gentleman of a particular kind...with rather long, still thick, dark hair, slightly streaked with gray, and a small pointed beard." (*Brothers* 11.9, 534)

After the expectations sown by Ivan's association with the devil—his Inquisitor and his diabolical double, Smerdyakov—his visitor assumes the form not of the Prince of Darkness but of a petty, unprepossessing man whose role is to travesty and mock Ivan's intellectual position. Throughout their conversation the devil, this ridiculous figure of Ivan's creative unconscious, makes explicit what Ivan himself refuses to confront: all the intellectual weaknesses, false notes, contradictions, and empty rhetoric seen in Ivan's earlier efforts to articulate his "idea." As Joseph Frank has noted, the devil represents metaphorically the voice of Ivan's conscience revolting against his reason: "'Everything is permitted' for those who do not believe in God and immortality, and Ivan has rejected

³¹ Dostoevsky's formulation is remarkably similar to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic. Just as Dostoevsky stresses the uncertainty of a fantastic event—"you must almost believe in it," "you do not know what to think"—so too does Todorov underscore the role of hesitation. "'I nearly reached the point of believing,'" Todorov writes; "that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life" (101). Dostoevsky admired Poe for this ability to weave a character's (often abnormal) angle of vision into the narrative (Frank, *Liberation* 74-75).

both. Why, then, should he be tormented by feelings of moral guilt that derive from such principles?" (*Prophet* 678). Ivan's self-doubt manifests itself in the devil's mocking strategy of "whispering into the ear of the hero his own words with a displaced accent" (*Problems* 222).

Once again, Ivan refuses to listen. He tries with all his might to convince himself that the devil is merely a figment of his imagination.

"Not for a single moment do I take you for the real truth," Ivan cried, somehow even furiously. "You are a lie, you are my illness, you are a phantom. It's only that I don't know how to destroy you and I see I must suffer for a time. You are my hallucination. You are the incarnation of myself, but only of one side of me...of my thoughts and feelings, but only the nastiest and stupidest of them. From that point of view you might be of interest to me, if only I had time to waste on you." (*Brothers* 11.9, 535).

Throughout their exchange Ivan cannot decide whether the event is merely a dream or a hallucination or if, on the other hand, he has just been paid a visit by an otherworldly traveler. It is an event that is as unsettling as it is comical.

Ivan's meeting with his devil is a masterful scene, one that left an unmistakable imprint on Faulkner³² and also one that indicates the importance of threshold spaces in Dostoevsky's fiction. As an embodiment of the concept of transition from one space, state, or time to another, the threshold was gives a visual image to uncertainty and transition (Leatherbarrow, *Demonic* 7-8). In the scene above, as Ivan teeters on the brink of sanity and insanity, his precarious mental state offers an ideal conduit through which devils, demons, and other supernatural creatures could pass from "the other world" into this one (Leatherbarrow, *Demonic* 7-8). Doorways, windows, stairways, and other apertures are a few examples of threshold or liminal spaces that occupy a central place in

³² Flem Snopes's meeting with Satan in *The Hamlet* has been linked to Ivan's meeting with his devil (Bloshteyn, "Anguish").

Dostoevsky's fiction and, as we will see, in *Absalom* as well. Just as Dostoevsky uses Ivan meeting with his devil to dramatize the tension between sanity/insanity and the natural/supernatural, so too are doorways, windows, and stairways key threshold spaces in both Quentin's and Miss Rosa's consciousness.

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"I have heard too much. I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long," thinks Quentin about midway through the novel (*Absalom* 218). This beleaguered twenty-year-old, older already than the already-dead, is "an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth" (*Absalom* 377; 12). Besieged by voices that insist on telling, he is constantly thrust into the undesirable position of passive narratee,³³ leading him to vehemently resist listening to that which he has heard before.

Like Ivan, Quentin is deeply divided. We learn from the start that there are two Quentins: one who would escape to Harvard and distance himself from the "outraged baffled ghosts" of the Deep South, and another Quentin who is "doomed to become a ghost himself." This doubling into the living Quentin and his ghost symbolizes the division between the present and the past, the living and the dead, and even reality and unreality. He exists in one specific part of history as a living, breathing human, yet his existence is really a collection of histories older than he is—especially the history of Sutpen:

³³ See Martin.

It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson. (Absalom 9)

This italicized passage, which seems to suggest various registers of Quentin's unconscious, pieces together the fragments of other voices and recasts them in the form of an interior conversation. These lonely "microdialogues," as Bakhtin calls them, plague Quentin because they do not give others the chance to intervene or offer help (*Problems* 220). Nevertheless, Quentin turns inward in order to find some way to understand his emotional pain through the Sutpen story.

As John T. Irwin and several others have suggested, Quentin seizes upon the parallel between Henry's relationship with Judith and his own relationship with Caddy. Although it is unclear how much weight should be given to this parallel,³⁴ Irwin's explanation does help to explain Quentin's moments of identification with Henry; his first purchase on the Sutpen legend is through Henry's incestuous love for Judith. But Quentin's preoccupation with his sister is less material than idealistic: he is drawn to her, in other words, not only for who Caddy is but also for what she represents. As Faulkner puts it (quite humorously), Quentin "loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole vast globe earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal" (*The Sound and the Fury* 207).

³⁴Irwin reads the *Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom* as a single novel although there is no mention in the latter text that Quentin has a sister. For a critique of Irwin, see Kuyk 110-16.

Quentin clings to his abstract notion of southern honor, romantically attempting to rise above ordinary human behavior, clinging to ridiculous theories in the face of hard facts, growing terrified “of blackness, sex, and the mundane realities of men who cheat a cards and women who fornicate in the woods” (Kartiganer 114). Proud of his heritage but ashamed of its transgressions, he participates in the retelling of the Sutpen story in the hope of ridding himself of his ambivalence.

As Quentin sits in conversation with himself, another voice continually barges in on the “two Quentins”: the invading voice of Miss Rosa, who demands to be heard and refuses to cede transmission of the narrative. Many critics have dismissed her narrative out of hand as mad ravings; others have dubbed her account as an exemplary “hysterical narrative” (Weinstein); and most of all, her narrative has been seen as unremittingly Gothic.³⁵ The Gothicism of Rosa’s account must, however, be seen as the product of her role as an outsider and a threat to a patriarchal clan, the Compsons, who arrogate to themselves the right to tell and interpret the Sutpen legend.

Even before she meets Sutpen, her netherwordly “demon,” Rosa’s early life is painfully marginal. She is born into the old age of a man, Goodhue Coldfield, who is widowed by her birth. As a housekeeper and a passive observer, she has never learned anything, we learn, “*save listen through closed doors*” (*Absalom* 60). She grows further isolated when Ellen moves to Sutpen’s Hundred, leaving Rosa alone with a father who keeps “the front shutters closed and fastened” and, during the war, refuses to allow her “to look out the window at passing soldiers” (*Absalom* 65; 67). Now she sits imprisoned in a “dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers” (*Absalom* 7). Throughout *Absalom* the significance of thresholds—doors,

³⁵ Pitavy and Coss both discuss the Gothic elements of *Absalom*.

windows, staircases—represent not only the surmounting of psychological hurdles but also the *inability* to extricate oneself from confinement.³⁶

Rosa's passive role is only made worse when she meets Sutpen. "And then one afternoon," she recalls, "I looked up and saw him looking at me. He had sent me for twenty years, but now he was looking at me" (*Absalom* 161). At first, Sutpen gives her the hope of being something other than invisible or an afterthought—a hope that proves illusory when he treats her like chattel or a lowly animal, "a bitch dog or a cow or mare" (*Absalom* 162). Most of all, her rage results from his crude suggestions that they sire a son before marrying; his pragmatism greatly insults her propriety. Enraged with the man for forty-three years, she sits frozen in a death-like trance: she is "grim," "straight," static, "impotent," implacable, "rigid," lifeless, "hard," "dead." Rosa desperately needs someone to whom she can tell her story, and she turns to Quentin Compson, presumably because he is "born and bred in the deep South" and also "because you are going to attend the college at Harvard they tell me" (*Absalom* 9). We learn later from Mr. Compson that she actually chooses him because she needs someone to go out to Sutpen's Hundred with her. But there is a third reason: to find a teller over whom she can assert her identity and "hold the floor." Her exchange with Quentin is less a dialogue than a monologue, with Quentin politely responding every so often.

Like Quentin and Shreve's "tomblike" room at Harvard, the "dim coffin-smelling gloom" of the Coldfield house becomes the appropriate locus for the apparition of the ghost ("man-horse-demon") conjured up by the old lady. In such dark or sepulchral

³⁶ Throughout Faulkner's work closed windows represent repression—especially sexual repression—for characters like Rosa and Emily Grierson, but they also give access to an outside world of (sexual) freedom for those who, like Caddy, the female Quentin, and Lena Grove, are courageous enough to climb through to the outside world.

places, both Quentin and Miss Rosa are themselves ghostlike figures whose narration only conjures more shadows, shades, ghosts, phantom, demons, and djinns.

It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dream (verisimilitude) to credulity—horror or pleasure or amazement—depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsing time as music or a printed tale

(*Absalom* 22)

Miss Rosa's nocturnal narrative turns her adversary into a "man-horse-demon" and has the logic, or illogic, of a dream. Through her "grim haggard amazed voice" Rosa conjures the ghost of Sutpen and makes him vividly present until, just as quickly, it disappears: "Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish" (*Absalom* 7). Her voice, mimicking the function of a ghost, is both a presence and an absence as it haunts its listener (Quentin) and introduces a number of oppositions: speaking and hearing, sound and silence, ghost and not-ghost. Rosa's grotesque vision is primarily an act of creation in which her conflicted voice speaks a world of ghosts, demons, and devils into existence.

Rosa has been called "Faulkner's most Dostoevskian female character" and has been linked elsewhere with the Underground Man, designations that imply a hysterical, emotionally-charged narrative (Scherer 305; Doody 460). What is most important about this parallel, I believe, is less her hysterical tone than the vehemence with which she tries to dominate the conversation. While her utterances are directed towards Quentin (and are in that sense dialogic), they are driven by a desire to extinguish the authority of another (and are in that sense monologic). Like the Underground Man, Ivan, and Ivan's Grand Inquisitor, Rosa uses her voice to harass the listener into silent submission; she demands to have the last say.

Quentin's response to Rosa's voice is simple: he stops listening. In stark contrast to Alyosha or the Inquisitor's Christ, who listen attentively, Quentin refuses to be bothered with his interlocuter. Rosa's choice of Quentin is a very poor indeed, given his status in a line of Compsons who consider themselves the rightful owners of the Sutpen legend. It was General Compson, after all, who hears the first part of the story from Sutpen himself, which makes Mr. Compson and Quentin the bearers of the patriarchal legend. Her impulse to have the final say is thus in direct opposition with the other, competing (male) voices that try to shut her up. Mr. Compson, for instance, sardonically refers to Rosa as raised in a "closed masonry of females" (*Absalom* 59) that is cloistered away from the "real," male world. Rosa's "silencing," as Minrose Gwin calls it, takes place at the end of her monologue in chapter five when Quentin stops listening to her. At the start of the next chapter, when Quentin has gone to Harvard, he learns from his father of Rosa's death. As the author of the letter to Quentin, Mr. Compson writes her out of the story; Rosa's literal death also becomes a rhetorical death. "In the end," Gwin writes, "she herself is shut up, shut down, and shut out by men" (165). Rosa is thus grotesque in both a physical and a social sense: physical in the sense that her outward appearance, as a "mechanical doll" with "iron shinbones and ankles," suggests a physical and emotional ossification; social in the sense that she becomes an hysterical "throwaway" in the minds of the male community of tellers that excludes her (*Absalom* 371; 4).

As we have seen, Quentin tries to "silence" Rosa by refusing to listen to her. As Wesley Morris has argued, however, Quentin's decision to stop listening does not mean that he stops *hearing* her (202). As much as Quentin and the other male narrators might like to suppress it, traces of Rosa's voice appear throughout the rest of the narrative.

Shreve's repeated use of the word "demon" (like Darl's "begrudge") ironically subverts Rosa's meaning and undercuts her authority. Here, again, is the spoken word "accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 32). The other characters revise Rosa's portrait of Sutpen by altering rather than merely adding to it (Kuyk 128). But it is Quentin alone who cannot dissociate himself from Rosa's voice so easily; he is too invested in the story. It seems that the less he listens, the more he "hears" her.

It is important to mention, before turning to Quentin's final vision, that Faulkner does give us an instance of productive dialogue between Quentin and Shreve, just as Ivan's "positive" counterpoint is Alyosha. Their collaboration is not an easy achievement. When Shreve urges Quentin to "tell about the South," he remains stubbornly silent; later, when Quentin narrates Sutpen's meeting with Henry to discuss Bon and Judith, he protests against Shreve's interjections with "Wait, I tell you!...I am telling" (*Absalom* 218; 277). Slowly, however, as Shreve retells Quentin's story about Sutpen in the graveyard, he is inexorably drawn into talking with Shreve. In a strange moment, Quentin and Shreve somehow move beyond listening and telling to pure experience: "they were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago" (*Absalom* 351). Through an incredible, perhaps impossible joint effort, they successfully merge the past with the present and discover, in what many critics consider the novel's climactic scene, the moment when Sutpen tells Henry that Bon is black. In Albert Guerard's opinion, "Quentin and Shreve are actually carried back—the novel, rather, is carried back—to what I think is historical fact. They suddenly, with the italics on page 346 [351], partake of real omniscience" (75). Guerard's reading is, of course, debatable. Many

readers have concluded that Quentin and Shreve merely imagined the scene and that they achieve, as Rosa puts it, “*the might have been that is more true than truth*” (*Absalom* 143).³⁷ Whatever the case, the important point here is that their “marriage of speaking and hearing” is successful. Quentin’s willingness to listen yields the most profitable narrative account in the novel.

The union between Quentin and Shreve is short-lived. Following their breakthrough, there exists a wrenching apart of the two Harvard students, as if they must recoil from the power of their discovery. Shreve retreats into mockery and youthful jesting; Quentin, into silence. Without Shreve, in Faulkner’s opinion, Quentin’s account “would have been completely unreal...it would have vanished into smoke and fury” (*University* 75). Yet, in the final pages, this is precisely what happens: Quentin retreats into his imagination and, with Rosa’s voice firmly entrenched in his consciousness, the story does indeed vanish into “smoke and fury.” This sets the stage for what is the most grotesque scene in the novel: Quentin’s recollection of Sutpen’s Hundred and his meeting with Henry Sutpen.

As the old Sutpen house looms in the distance, Quentin’s grotesque consciousness envisages a murky, twilight atmosphere that confuses the nocturnal and diurnal so that, at times, we are not quite certain whether something is really happening or merely being dreamt. As they ride closer, “the dead furnace-breath of air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and deep as if the mood of which it was built were flesh” (*Absalom* 366). The decaying, almost sentient house

³⁷“If there is truth in the narration of Quentin and Shreve,” writes Donald Kartiganer, “it does not depend on a closeness to historical fact, but on the vitality of the telling and passionate involvement of the narrators with their subject and with each other” (92). Kuyk argues that the scene depicts historical fact but that its truth is discovered by the external narrator rather than Quentin and Shreve (40-44).

comes from out of a dream or from Poe. The atmosphere is such that anything seems possible.

This uncertainty intensifies when Quentin struggles to enter the house. “If we can just get to the house,” he tells himself, “get inside the house.” (*Absalom* 369).

Throughout *Absalom* closed doors and windows represent key mental hurdles, challenging thresholds that stand as obstacles to some type of insight.³⁸ Miss Rosa has spent her whole life listening beyond closed doors. A black servant prevents the young Sutpen from entering through the front door because of his redneck roots. Henry bars Bon from crossing the threshold at the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred. Quentin “cannot pass” the moment when Henry runs up the stairs to his sister. Upon entering the house and confronting yet another threshold—the door to Henry’s room—Quentin hesitates again: “[he] paused there, saying ‘No. No’ and then ‘Only I must. I have to,’” as if to get inside will be to get inside the past, to gain access to the inner meaning of the Sutpen story (*Absalom* 372). At the same time, the doorway also represents the liminal space of Quentin’s distorted perceptions, a grotesque experiential space that hovers between waking and sleeping. Sitting in bed at Harvard, thinking back to the night when he lay in bed in his Mississippi home reliving his encounter with Henry, Quentin realizes that “there was no difference: waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between the scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling” (*Absalom* 370). Finally, he goes inside.

What we find, as Quentin peers down at a sallow, aging Henry Sutpen, is almost certainly not the actual words spoken between the pair but rather the distilled essence of the effect of the encounter on Quentin:

And you are—?

³⁸ Heberden explores this topic in an interesting article.

Henry Sutpen.
And you have been here—?
Four years.
And you came home—?
To die. Yes.
To die?
Yes. To die.
And you have been here—?
Four years.
And you are—?
Henry Sutpen. (Absalom 373)

While much has been written about this pivotal scene, I read their conversation—or the lack of one—as a confirmation of Quentin’s gradual inability to engage in productive dialogue. During this scene and the one directly after it, which Quentin continues to imagine, we glimpse the fates of two narrators who refuse to listen:

he (Quentin) could see her, then; he had not been there but he could see her, struggling and fighting like a doll in a nightmare, making no sound, foaming a little at the mouth, her face even in the sunlight lit by one last wild crimson reflection as the house collapsed and roared away, and there was only the sound of the idiot negro left. (Absalom 376).

One again we are beyond normal perception: Quentin, like Darl, is not physically present (“he had not been there”) but he can still “see” Miss Rosa who (also like Darl) is “foaming.” As Miss Rosa is savagely silenced, the only sound left is nonsensical wailing, the absolute failure of dialogue.

Quentin successfully crosses the threshold but is thereafter haunted, even in his room at Harvard one year later, by the ramifications of his discovery. Realizing that he cannot talk to the real Henry, or anyone else for that matter, Quentin retreats entirely into the past. Refusing active participation he, like Ivan and Darl, gives in to the tempting impulse of a detached solipsism. By the end of the novel Quentin appears all but dead in the tomb-like, frozen dorm room, lying down in “the dead moment before dawn”

(*Absalom* 298). This is surely a great difference between this final treatment of Quentin and Ivan and, by extension, Faulkner and Dostoevsky. At the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* (which Dostoevsky wrote with plans for a sequel in mind),³⁹ Ivan lays in the next room “unconscious in a high fever,” his fate unclear, his journey unfinished (*Brothers*, Epilogue 631). Whereas Ivan’s fate is precarious but undetermined, the great tragedy of *Absalom* is its inevitability, especially if we take into account the fact that Quentin, having committed suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*, is already a “ghost” doomed to suicide. In that book he is beyond listening, forever trapped within his monologic nightmare of southern honor and history, doomed to look forever backward.

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“Dostoevsky,” writes Bakhtin, “asserts the impossibility of solitude, the illusory nature of solitude. The very being of man (both external and internal) is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered” (*Problems* 287). Rather than focusing upon the pitfalls of monologue and solipsism, Bakhtin stressed the optimistic side of Dostoevsky’s fiction. I have taken the opposite approach, focusing on ways in which characters grow grotesque by treating others as lifeless objects rather than living subjects. In creating a dialogic form that contrasted with their characters’ coercive impulses, Faulkner’s and Dostoevsky narratives reinforce the paradox that, while their characters stand apart as individuals, they are inseparable from a larger collective of speakers and listeners. A failure to acknowledge the importance of this larger verbal community, as

³⁹ See Rice, “Dostoevsky’s Endgame.”

Ivan, Darl, Quentin, and Rosa learn, is the hell of isolation, “the absolute lack of being heard” (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 126).

By emphasizing this negative path—a path that I believe Faulkner and Dostoevsky stressed as well—little attention has been paid to those “positive” moments of productive communication in which, for example, Alyosha seeks out his brothers and tries to talk with them; or when Quentin and Shreve achieve, even in the midst of adolescent bickering, a precarious narrative twinning that yields a powerful, unvoiced imaginative vision. These moments, however transient, suggest that willful sacrifice and participation can lead one out of the endless narrative struggle and show a way toward potential redemption. They also suggest that, in the midst of all the talking, a special place is reserved for silence. Some of the most pivotal scenes in all of Dostoevsky’s fiction—Raskolnikov peering into Sonia’s face, Myshkin and Roghozin’s vigil over Nastasya’s body, and Alyosha’s silent kiss to his brother—are wordless gestures. So too does the pursuit of the ineffable, the ability to somehow go beyond words, occupy a prized place in Faulkner’s work. We find it briefly in Darl’s unspoken understanding with Cash when they stare at each other “with long probing looks, looks that plunge unimpeded through one another’s eyes and into the ultimate secret place where for an instant Cash and Darl crouch flagrant and unabashed in all the old terror and the old foreboding, alert and secret and without shame” (*As I Lay Dying* 115). We also find it, briefly and in a different register, in the communion between Quentin and Shreve, those two flawed but gifted tellers who deserve the last word:

It did not matter to each of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the others—faultings

both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived—in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false. (*Absalom* 316)

Conclusion

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue...Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* (170)

Even as Quentin and Shreve fight for and, perhaps, deserve the last word, neither they nor anyone else can claim it. As Bakhtin suggests, the word mutates, accumulates new meanings, and extends beyond its original context into the “boundless future.” One of my aims has been to see the modern southern literary tradition and Dostoevsky’s fiction as part of this boundless dialogue, which stretches from the nineteenth century to the twentieth and beyond. Indeed, as I reach the end of this project, I am struck most of all by its suggestiveness: by the way in which it gestures toward potential conversations, hinted-at juxtapositions, and paths that remain to be explored. The elusiveness of the southern grotesque—its refusal to stand still or make sense—has been simultaneously challenging, frustrating, and illuminating. To conclude, I consider a few alternative directions and modes of analysis that this study (or studies like it) might adopt in the future. First, however, I return to a question involving those southern grotesques whom I have linked with Dostoevsky’s own misfits, mystics, and madmen.

I suggested at the start that, for O’Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner, the grotesque captured their characters’ unfinished struggles to achieve renewal in spite of alienation

and pain. What, in the end, can we say about these struggles? Do their characters actually achieve renewal? Usually they do not. The ideal for which John Singer, O.E. Parker, Darl Bundren, and many others strive—love, communication, community—is tantalizingly out of reach. One result of reading Dostoevsky alongside southern fiction, this study suggests, is that one discovers a similarly apophatic dimension within O'Connor's, McCullers's, and Faulkner's fiction. Throughout *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, a trope of reversal is at work. Rather than expressing itself positively, Dostoevsky's fiction often operates through negation, silence, and deferral. It could even be said that his fiction represents an arrow that points beyond itself to an implicit, lost ideal.¹

For both Dostoevsky and O'Connor, the "arrow" of their fiction invariably points to the Gospels and to Christ. Such is the case (among many others examples) when Sonia and Raskolnikov read the story of Lazarus, when Myshkin tells his story of the peasant girl Marie, and when the Inquisitor speaks at length to a mute Jesus. As I have argued, O'Connor pursued a similarly "incarnational" vision of art with mixed results. In *Wise Blood*, Christ's presence manifests itself largely as an absence. Haze's haunting savior appears as a "stinger" in his grandfather's head, a "pinpoint of light" at the end of a tunnel, an unrealizable ideal that fades into the background (*Wise* 20; 218). In her mature fiction O'Connor offers concrete images of the degraded ideal: Parker's tattoo, Shiftlet's crooked, cross-liked arms, and the hermaphrodite at the fair. For O'Connor, the grotesque and its jarring power, violence, and absurdity is not the solution; it is rather the call to the solution.

¹ See Jones's *Dynamics*, especially 62-65.

It is tempting to say that, if McCullers's fiction is an arrow, then it is an arrow pointing to a question mark. Just as McCullers herself was unable to find love, or even to name it, so too is her fiction skeptical that authentic love, whether spiritual or romantic, is attainable. The lover and the beloved, as she wrote in *Ballad*, always come from different countries. This, perhaps, is why McCullers's fiction (and her tumultuous personal life) lines up so well with *The Idiot*, which fails to capture the image of a "perfectly beautiful man." Faulkner similarly frustrates attempts to explain his fiction through a theological (or any other) framework. To be sure, he experimented with Christian symbolism—Joe Christmas and Benjy Compson come to mind, for starters—but it appears not as an "answer" but as part of a larger problematic. Theological and literary meanings are not braided together in Faulkner's and McCullers's fiction, as they seem to be in Dostoevsky and O'Connor, but are loosely and ambiguously related. Of course, it would be terribly reductive to insist that, for any of the writers considered here, the whole of their fiction points in this or that direction. I raise this issue only to suggest that their fiction, by leaving the hopes and desires of its characters unanswered, retains a sense of being evasive or, perhaps, allusive.

Whether this elusiveness (or allusiveness) is consoling or frustrating, and whether it implies a fullness or an absence, largely depends upon the judgment of the reader. I would argue, however, that the tendency to withhold renewal—or, worse, to prolong suffering—should not lead us to condemn southern fiction as gloomy, pessimistic, or "grotesque" in a negative sense. On the contrary, O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner—like Dostoevsky—tend to emphasize the *process* of renewal, which is itself a source of

affirmation. In *The Idiot*, Ippolit offers an illustration that applies to all of Dostoevsky's fiction:

Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was happy not when he had discovered America, but when he was discovering it. Take my word for it, the highest moment of his happiness was just three days before the discovery of the New World, when the mutinous crew were on the point of returning to Europe in despair...It's life that matters, nothing but life—the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself. (*Idiot* 3.5, 362)

The voyage, not the arrival at one's destination, matters most. Indeed, for Ippolit (and Dostoevsky), Columbus was happiest when he was on the verge of failure at the hands of his "mutinous crew"! By stressing transition and impermanence, Dostoevsky stands at the head of a modernist tradition that foregrounds the event, or the coming-to-be, of the journey over any final outcome. What sets Dostoevsky alongside southern writers in particular, as I have argued, is that this process vividly appears on the exaggerated bodies (or in the minds) of their characters. We might say, then, that some southern grotesques will indeed achieve renewal—but not yet.

These struggles do not only involve the grotesque characters found in modern southern fiction (who are, after all, fictive creations); they extend to the authors and readers who, through identification, also grapple with deformity and difference. In general, this study has emphasized the "literary"—that is, it subordinates (while also drawing upon) concerns of biography, culture, and reader-response in order to examine the grotesque as an aesthetic strategy. Alternative approaches, however, might foreground these biographical, cultural, or experiential dimensions. What did their deformed outsiders teach O'Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner about illness, aging, or health? What do they teach southerners about life in the postbellum South? What can they teach *us* about these fundamental issues? These questions, which are being asked

with increasing frequency in disability studies and the medical humanities,² are only a few other ways in which to consider fictional representations of disability and deformity.

One might also consider, given recent cultural and technological developments, contemporary iterations of the grotesque. As an aesthetic approach that contains an unmistakable religious dimension, the grotesque offers a strategy of incongruity by visualizing (and exaggerating) the brokenness and limitation of humanity. But what if the broken, limited body is no longer a given? What if we can slough off imperfection and infirmity on the way to newer, better bodies? These questions, far from being quixotic or hypothetical, are especially pressing in the current critical climate of post- and trans-humanism. Our future, as some would have it, will be one of genetically engineered, made-to-order bodies—perfect in every way. Others predict, even more radically, that we will transcend the inconvenient condition of embodiment altogether.³ Seen in this light, as the “postmodern grotesque” conflates humans and machines, all sorts of interesting questions can be raised. How does one discuss the grotesque if one can no longer pinpoint the implied norm from which it departs? What does southern fiction, with its incessant portraits of deformed, limited bodies, have to say about a future world of “perfect” corporeality or disembodied autonomy? What can literature contribute to these debates?

None of these questions can be answered here, of course. But they can be asked in the hope that, following Bakhtin, future dialogue will revise and perhaps improve upon previous discussions. In the end, the ambiguity surrounding the deformed outsiders that

² See Thomson and Carson, Burns, and Cole.

³ See especially the work of the futurist Ray Kurzweil, whose controversial *The Singularity is Near* (2005) envisions a world in which distinctions between humans and machines, reality and virtual reality, and even life and death will disappear completely. For a critique of Kurzweil and the notion of disembodied autonomy, see Wolfe, especially 49-98.

one finds in O'Connor's, McCullers's, and Faulkner's fiction—whether they are pathetic or uplifting, worthless or instructive, repulsive or attractive—only adds to the strangeness and the vitality of the southern grotesque. The fates of their characters, like the last word, are unfinished. We are left with an image of the southern grotesque that, as a continually re-forming process, is ever painful, playful, alive.

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